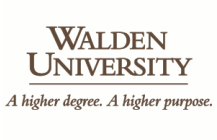

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Bridging the gap: Home-school partnerships in kindergarten

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Walden University

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

This is to certify that the dissertation by

Keenjal Pattni-Shah

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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2008

ABSTRACT

Bridging the Gap: Home-School Partnerships in Kindergarten

by

Keenjal Pattni-Shah

M.A., University of Toronto, 2003
Hon. B.Sc., University of Toronto, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
School of Education

Walden University
August 2008

ABSTRACT

Although home-school partnerships support Kindergarten children's development of vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness, the mechanisms through which these partnerships are established and facilitated with immigrant parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are largely unknown. Therefore, the major research questions that guided this qualitative, grounded theory study focused on exploring how successful Kindergarten teachers defined home-school partnerships with parents, the strategies the teachers used to communicate with parents, the ways these teachers reached out to parents to create and sustain partnerships, and how the teachers used these partnerships to support children's learning. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory served as the conceptual framework because it supports the critical role that parents play in children's learning and development. To collect the data, the experiences and perceptions of 12 Kindergarten teachers obtained from the Toronto District School Board were elicited through in-depth, semistructured interviews using open-ended questions. I also examined documents used to communicate with parents. Following the guidelines of grounded theory methodology, the data analysis involved open, axial, and selective coding. The results indicated that before Kindergarten teachers can create and sustain home-school partnerships, the teachers must embrace diversity and adopt appropriate practices that enable all parents to become involved. Given that the ability to read is paramount to children's academic success, this study leads to positive social change by providing Kindergarten teachers with a model that they can use to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with immigrant parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to support children's development of early reading skills.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late mother, Reena Pattni, who sacrificed so very much to bring our family to Canada so that we could have a better, brighter future. When nothing seemed to be going my way, my mom always stood by me, and she taught me that I must believe in myself. There are so many things that I learned from my mom, and she continues to be my greatest inspiration. She is the bright star at the end of this journey, and I felt her presence and her strength during my most difficult days. My mom taught me how to be passionate and dedicated; most importantly, she taught me the value of perseverance. Thank you for everything, Mom. I wish that you were here today.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

When schools and families work together to support children's learning, all children succeed in school (Becher, 1986; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; de Jong & Leseman, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994). As Henderson and Berla noted, the most accurate predictor of students' achievement in school is not family income or social status, but the extent to which parents are able to encourage and promote their children's learning and become involved in their education. Therefore, a major goal of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) was that "by the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" (Section 102).

All parents want their children to succeed, and educators work tirelessly to ensure that their students have the tools they need to succeed both in school and to thrive in the world outside of school. The basic requirement for this success, however, is the ability to read successfully. As Sousa (2005) explained, we live in a society in which one prerequisite to success is the ability to read proficiently because reading serves as the foundation for all school-based learning. The inability to read greatly limits students' learning, and it has many compelling effects in areas that extend beyond schooling. For example, Wolfe and Nevills (2004) reported that surveys of young adults with criminal records revealed that half of these people had reading difficulties. More alarming, however, is the fact that an increasing proportion of children are labeled "learning disabled" because they have difficulties learning how to read.

Given that this ability to read is such an important prerequisite for children's success, it is incumbent upon Kindergarten teachers to work with parents to ensure that all children learn the many foundational early reading skills they will need to benefit from formal reading instruction. Perhaps Wolfe and Nevills (2004) explained it the most effectively when they stated that "not only is reading fluently and with comprehension by third grade a legislated priority, it is an ethical and professional imperative" (p. xi). As the literature review shows, there are many early skills that children need to have learned before they can benefit from formal reading instruction, which, in Ontario, Canada, begins in Grade 1. However, this study focused on three specific skills: basic vocabulary acquisition, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness.

Although it has been known for some time that parents play a critical role in children's academic achievement, it is only recently that researchers have begun to focus their efforts on understanding the specific role of schools in encouraging parents to become involved in their children's education. Central to this role is the partnership that develops between teachers and parents (Booth & Dunn, 1996). These partnerships provide parents with the guidance and support they need to become actively involved in their children's learning and development (Broussard, 2003; Christenson, 1995a; Clark, 1983).

As indicated in the review of the literature, several studies have shown that parents are children's first and primary teachers, they play a crucial role in establishing the foundation of their children's education, and they are critically important in facilitating their children's development and achievement (Becher, 1986). With respect to

reading, there is a widespread public misconception that children do not begin learning to read until they enter Grade 1 (Sousa, 2005; Wolfe & Nevills, 2004). Although the primary focus of the Grade 1 teacher is to facilitate reading instruction, studies have indicated that for children to benefit from this reading instruction, they need to have acquired foundational reading skills before they enter Grade 1 (e.g., Adams, 1990; Goswami & Bryant, 1990).

Although Kindergarten teachers may use exemplary instructional programs in their classrooms to help their students develop early reading skills, research has shown that parents must work with their children at home to reinforce these skills learned at school (Anderson, 1995; Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; de Jong & Leseman, 2001). However, Broussard (2003) reported that parents, especially culturally and linguistically diverse parents, often need guidance and support about the kinds of instructional strategies they can use with their children at home, and the specific skills that they should focus on. Therefore, these parents benefit from home-school partnerships in which teachers work collaboratively with parents to support them and empower them to work with their children at home. Riley, former secretary of the U.S. Office of Education, explained:

> Parents are the essential link to improving American education, and schools have to do a better job of reaching out to them. Sending home a report card is not enough. Parents want to help their children succeed in school, and often need guidance on how to be most effective. (as cited in Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p. 11)

Background of the Study

The concept of family-school partnerships is relatively simple. It is about a plausible idea, namely, that educators should encourage all families to become involved in their children's education and that educators should reach out to families in new and different ways (Edwards, 2004). However, in order to create and sustain positive home-school partnerships, there must be a mechanism to identify and systematically address barriers that may impede the establishment of such partnerships. Although barriers are perceived to be negative, they can present an opportunity to change practices in a way that increases understanding between families and educators. Moreover, to establish collaborative home-school partnerships that promote student learning, appropriate practices that reflect parents' and educators' roles and responsibilities need to be in place (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2001). Therefore, understanding the practices, beliefs, and attitudes that foster positive home-school partnerships is essential to establishing and facilitating productive home-school partnerships. The Kindergarten Program (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2006) has greatly emphasized the need to establish these home-school partnerships and to collaborate with parents to support children's learning.

Kindergarten Program in Ontario, Canada

Kindergarten marks the official beginning of formal schooling for all children within the public school systems in Ontario, Canada. Children in Ontario can start Kindergarten at age 4 and attend for 2 years. The program begins when children enter Junior Kindergarten and ends when they complete Senior Kindergarten and move on to

Grade 1. According to the OME (2006), this 2-year Kindergarten program is critical for children's learning and development, and the overall goal of Kindergarten is to give children many opportunities to learn the basic literacy, numeracy, and social skills required to help them transition to Grade 1 successfully. For children who are English language learners (ELLs), the focus is on helping them acquire basic communication skills that will enable them to interact with their peers and their teachers (OME).

Although beginning Kindergarten may be overwhelming for children, especially for children who have spent most of their time at home, the purpose of the Kindergarten Program is to ease this anxiety, to enable all children to experience the fact that school is a safe place, and to build their motivation and interest in learning (OME, 2006). However, parents are also very nervous when their children begin Kindergarten. This is especially relevant for parents from diverse backgrounds who may be struggling with the English language or who may be new immigrants to the country and, as a result, may be unfamiliar with the Canadian education system.

For example, parents may worry about the kinds of learning experiences their children will have at school, as well as how the teachers will work with their children, especially those who may be ELLs. Therefore, the onus is on Kindergarten teachers to reach out to parents, establish strong partnerships with them to help them support and enhance their children's learning, and emphasize to the parents that the work they do with their children at home is a prerequisite for the children's success. As Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) reported, most parents make the choice to become involved when they understand and accept that collaboration is part of their role as parents; when they

believe that they can positively influence their children's education; and when the invitations, demands, and opportunities for involvement are presented to them by the teachers and administrators at the school.

The Kindergarten Program (OME, 2006) is based on the educational philosophy of constructivism and is grounded in the principles of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. According to this theory, children construct new meanings and build their repertoire of knowledge through social interactions with others (Vygotsky). Thus, children need many opportunities to interact with adults and their peers to make sense of the world around them and to learn new concepts and skills. Therefore, the OME emphasized that "teachers, early childhood educators, members of the community, and families should work together to provide challenging and engaging learning experiences that will build children's confidence and encourage them to continue to see learning as both enjoyable and useful" (p. 2). In addition, the OME highlighted the critical need for principals and teachers to identify the strengths, needs, and unique characteristics of the school community to maximize parents' participation in their children's education. The text also explained that by welcoming parents and communicating with them regularly, teachers can encourage the parents to become supportive partners in their children's education.

Kindergarten teachers were selected for this study because they are the first individuals whom parents encounter when their children begin formal schooling. In this capacity, Kindergarten teachers can greatly influence parents' perceptions about home-school partnerships, and they can help parents realize the instrumental role they play in

their children's learning. Undoubtedly, as Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) reported, if parents feel valued, respected, and welcome, and if they understand that they play an important role in their children's education, they will be much more willing to become involved in their children's education and, more importantly, to stay involved. This contention was supported by Epstein (1991), who observed that parents who become involved with schools during the early childhood years are likely to maintain the involvement in the child's later schooling.

Toronto District School Board

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB, 2007), one of several district school boards in Ontario, Canada, is the largest in Canada and among the largest in North America. In Ontario, each district school board is responsible for financial and governing decisions for its specific district, but all are funded by the OME. For example, the TDSB is responsible for all schools that are located within the boundaries of the city of Toronto.

In addition to being the largest school board in Canada, the TDSB is also among the most diverse school boards. According to the statistics reported by the TDSB (2007), more than 30% of all students were born outside of Canada, representing 175 different countries. Of the new immigrant students, more than 10% have been in Canada for 3 years or less. Furthermore, only 47% of all students speak English as their first language, and the remaining 53% of students represent over 80 different languages, including, for example, Cantonese, Gujarati, Mandarin, Pashto, Punjabi, Urdu, Serbian, Spanish, Swahili, and Vietnamese (TDSB).

These statistics are representative of the city of Toronto, which has been termed the "city of many cultures and languages" because it is home to virtually all of the world's culture groups, and it is a city where more than 100 languages and dialects are spoken. This diversity of race, culture, and languages sets the city of Toronto apart from other world cities ("Diversity in Toronto," 2008). In addition, almost three quarters of Torontonians ages 15 or older have direct ties to immigration. About one half (52%) are themselves immigrants, and another 22% are second-generation immigrants with at least one parent born outside of Canada. Only the remaining 26% of the Toronto population ages 15 or older are comprised of individuals who were born in Canada to two Canadian-born parents (Schellenberg, 2004). According to the most recent census, this is considered to be the highest proportion of a foreign-born population in 75 years (Statistics Canada, 2006).

From these statistics, it is clear that Toronto is a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse city, and based on a report of the students it serves, the TDSB is a good representation of this diversity. Because the purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences related to establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships with diverse parents, Kindergarten teachers who work in this school board were chosen to participate in this study.

Statement of the Problem

Although there is much literature available on the benefits of home-school partnerships in Kindergarten children's development of early reading skills, specifically basic vocabulary development, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness

(e.g., Adams, 1990; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Dickinson, Cote, & Smith, 1993; Kalia, 2007; Wolfe & Nevills, 2004), the problem is that the mechanisms through which Kindergarten teachers establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with immigrant parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to support children's development of these early reading skills is largely unknown. This is an especially relevant and pressing issue in Ontario, Canada, because schools are becoming more diverse.

Purpose of the Study

Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, it became clear that although there is much important information available on the benefits of home-school partnerships, the existing knowledge base is stronger for the "what" than the "how." Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore Kindergarten teachers' perceptions and experiences of establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and to use the rich descriptions the teachers provided to develop a model of home-school partnerships. The goal was to present Kindergarten teachers with a model that they can use to create and sustain home-school partnerships with diverse parents to promote children's development of vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness. Given that the ability to read is a prerequisite for academic success, this study contributes important information about how parents of culturally and linguistically diverse children can be supported so that they can effectively work with their children at home.

Conceptual Framework

This study drew on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory as it relates to children's development of early reading skills. The principle tenets of this theory are that language mediates learning and that children construct knowledge through scaffolded or guided interactions with adults. According to Vygotsky's theory, children acquire mental processes and new skills by interacting with others and only after this shared experience can children internalize these mental processes and skills and use them independently.

Vygotsky (1978) asserted that new capacities in children are first developed during collaboration with adults and then internalized to become a part of the children's psychological world. Based on this theory, parent-child communication and the learning activities that parents engage in with their children at home are instrumental in helping children learn new skills. This transfer of knowledge and skills from the shared environment to children's independent environment happens in a region that Vygotsky termed the zone of proximal development, or ZPD, and the support that adults provide to assist in this transfer of knowledge is referred to as scaffolding. Therefore, Vygotsky considered collaboration to be a source of cognitive development, and he asserted that it is only through cooperative dialogues with more knowledgeable adults during challenging tasks that children are able to acquire new skills.

Using Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory as the conceptual framework, the premise for this study was that teachers must work with parents in partnership to provide parents with the tools they need to work with their children at home and to help children develop the early reading skills that are critical in helping them benefit from formal

reading instruction and become proficient readers. This premise was supported by Webster and Feiler (1998), who noted that early literacy is a socially constructed phenomenon, intercalated with children's day-to-day routines of family life. Moreover, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights the imperative for parents to work with their children at home, to scaffold their learning, and to help them consolidate and internalize the skills that they will have learned at school. Therefore, this theory was used as the basis to develop a model for Kindergarten teachers to use to establish and facilitate partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Nature of the Study

This study used a qualitative strategy of inquiry, given the study's exploratory nature and intent to understand how the participants "make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 2001, p. 6). Furthermore, Strauss and Corbin (1998) explained that qualitative methods "can be used to explore substantive areas about which little is known or about which much is known to gain novel understandings" (p. 11). Based on Strauss and Corbin's assertion, this study was suited to be a qualitative study because even though the benefits of home-school partnerships are well documented, Kindergarten teachers' perceptions and experiences about establishing and facilitating these partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse parents are largely unknown.

For the context of this study, a grounded theory approach was selected. The specific techniques and procedures for collecting and analyzing the data are presented in detail in chapter 3. Briefly, the data for this study were collected through interviews and

document analysis. Purposive sampling was used to invite 12 Kindergarten teachers to participate in semistructured, in-depth interviews. In addition, these teachers were asked to share the notes, letters, and any kind of communication they sent home with the children that were aimed specficially at supporting children's development of early reading skills. The purpose of using interviews and document analysis to collect the data was to vary the data collection methods to gain in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences, and to triangulate the data. Following the guidelines of the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), data analysis involved open, selective, and axial coding; the constant comparison method was used to compare the data collected at each stage of analysis.

Research Questions

This grounded theory study was guided and framed by the following research questions:

1. How do successful Kindergarten teachers define home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?
2. According to these Kindergarten teachers, in what ways do home-school partnerships support children's development of early reading skills?
3. What are some strategies that these Kindergarten teachers use to communicate with parents on a regular basis?
4. In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers reach out to parents to establish and facilitate partnerships with them?

5. In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers use home-school partnerships to support children's development of basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness?

Assumptions

The goal of this qualitative study was to elicit teachers' perspectives and experiences. Therefore, it was assumed that teachers who agreed to participate would be open, forthcoming, and honest so that their responses to the interview questions would be an accurate reflection of their perceptions and experiences. It would not have been possible for the study to progress without such responses from the teachers. Therefore, the researcher informed all teachers that she was interested in learning about their perspectives and experiences, and she encouraged them to speak candidly and openly. In addition, the invited participants worked only with the TDSB; no Kindergarten teachers from the numerous other school boards in Ontario were invited to participate. However, based on the TDSB's statistics on the diversity of its student population, it was assumed that the Kindergarten teachers at this school board would have significant experience working with diverse populations and, therefore, would have much to share.

Delimitations

The specific parameters that bounded this study and limited its generalizability were twofold: First, the study took place during the 2007-2008 academic year and only included Kindergarten teachers at the TDSB. Second, the study included Kindergarten teachers who had a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience. Using Podsen's (2002) model as it relates to teacher career stages, purposive sampling was used to select the

sample. According to Podsen, teachers who have taught for at least 5 years are at a point in their careers when they are "teacher specialists" who have developed the ability to "seek more in-depth understanding of students and their learning needs"(p. 25). Moreover, unlike novice teachers, who are "focused on survival" (Podsen, p. 23), teacher specialists have developed a solid understanding of their skills and abilities and, consequently, have much more confidence in their pedagogical approach.

Limitations

The following section highlights the four potential weaknesses of this study and explains how they were controlled: First, researcher bias could have influenced the intepretation of the findings. To ensure that the findings were trustworthy, several strategies were incorporated into the study design, for example, triangulation of data sources, the use of member checks, memo writing, and acknowledgment of researcher bias throughout the narrative following the data analysis.

Second, purposive sampling was used to recruit the participants for this study. To do so, principals at schools with a high population of children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as identified by the equity officers at the TDSB, were contacted. These principals were then asked to recommend Kindergarten teachers at their respective schools who had successfully established and sustained home-school partnerships with parents. The caveat, however, was that although the principals may have had knowledge of teachers at their school who had facilitated such partnerships, they may not have been aware of the extent of these partnerships or how effectively these teachers were able to support parents' efforts as they worked with their children on early reading skills.

Therefore, to ensure that these teachers were suitable informants for this study, the researcher explained the specific goals of the study to the teachers and recommended that the teachers to reflect on whether they felt that they could contribute to this study. In addition, an e-mail was posted on a forum on the TDSB's e-mail system that was created specifically for all Kindergarten teachers. This e-mail explained in detail the purpose of the study and invited teachers to participate. The assumptions were that the teachers would read the e-mail in detail and understand the specific criteria required to participate in the study, and that teachers are in a better position than principals to evaluate their own practice. From the teachers who were recommended by the principals and who responded to the e-mail posted on the Kindergarten forum, the researcher selected 12 participants.

Finally, this study focused only on understanding how Kindergarten teachers established home-school partnerships to support children's development of early reading skills; other areas of the curriculum were not addressed.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms in this study may have multiple meanings, based upon the context, and may be professional jargon. Therefore, they are operationally defined.

Alphabetic principle: In alphabetic languages, the alphabetic principle has been identified as a key early reading skill that enables young children to benefit from formal reading instruction. According to Adams (1990), the alphabetic principle is defined as the understanding that letters are used to represent speech sounds, or phonemes, and that there are systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken words. Moreover, Sousa (2005) explained that knowledge of the alphabetic principle

enables young children to recognize that spoken words are made up of phonemes and that the phonemes are represented in written texts as letters.

Communication: Open, two-way communication is an important element of an atmosphere that is conducive for creating and sustaining home-school partnerships. Teachers can communicate with parents by sending home newsletters, homework journals, or setting up interview times. Frequent communication can set the stage for establishing shared goals and mutual decision making, and it can help parents understand how to reinforce learning in the home (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

Early reading skills: Building blocks that young children require to become proficient readers are defined as the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for developing reading and writing proficiency (Sousa). Although many early skills are important, this study focused on three specific skills, namely, basic vocabulary acquisition, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness. Therefore, the term early reading skills refer specifically to basic vocabulary acquisition, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness.

Home-school partnership: A way of thinking about forming connections between families and schools in order to establish an intentional and ongoing relationship to enhance children's learning and to address any obstacles that may impede this learning. A home-school partnership is characterized by a mutual effort toward a shared goal and, consequently, it implies the shared responsibility of families and educators working together to support students' learning (Christenson & Sheridan).

Parents: Although the traditional definition of a parent is restricted to a child's biological mother or father, in this study, parent means any individual who spends an extensive period of time with the child and is responsible for its well-being (Morrison, 1998). Thus, a parent may be a grandparent or an older sibling.

Phonemic awareness: A subdivision of phonological awareness and is defined as the understanding that words are made up of individuals sounds, or phonemes, and that these sounds can be manipulated to form new words. Children who have developed phonemic awareness are able to discriminate the sounds they hear in words. According to Sousa, there is a strong positive correlation between phonemic awareness and success in early reading.

Phonological awareness: The recognition that oral language can be divided into smaller components such as sentences into words, words into syllables, and syllables into individual phonemes (Sousa). Stanovich (1994) defined phonological awareness as the ability to deal explicitly with sound units smaller than the syllable. Phonemic awareness is important in helping children develop phonological awareness (Adams, 1990; Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Sousa).

Toronto District School Board (TDSB): The TDSB is one of several district school boards in Ontario, Canada. It is the largest and among the most diverse in Canada. The TDSB is responsible for the governing and the financial decisions of all schools that fall within the boundaries of the city of Toronto. The funding for this school board is provided by the OME.

Vocabulary: Vocabulary is the knowledge base that is important for many aspects of psycholinguistic processing. Before children can benefit from focused reading instruction, they must know some basic vocabulary because as beginning readers, children use the words they have heard to make sense of the words they see in print (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Here, basic vocabulary means children's knowledge of the sight words or words most commonly used in reading, and their repertoire of simple words that enable them to read with meaning.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because the findings may enable Kindergarten teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse families to establish and facilitate strong home-school partnerships to enhance children's development of early reading skills. In addition, because Kindergarten teachers were give the opportunity to candidly discuss the issues and challenges in creating and sustaining such partnerships, the findings of this study also may be relevant for school principals, who may gain more insight into how to support these teachers' efforts to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships. Moreover, the information shared by the Kindergarten teachers may enable the TDSB to develop programs specifically designed to support parents from diverse backgrounds as they attempt to work with their children at home.

Further, the findings of this study may make a significant contribution to the existing body of literature on the topic of home-school partnerships. To date, there has been much research on the benefits of home-school partnerships, but limited literature on Kindergarten teachers' perceptions about establishing and facilitating home-school

partnerships with diverse parents to support children's development of early reading skills. Therefore, the model presented in this study may be used by Kindergarten teachers to create partnerships with parents within the teachers' own teaching contexts.

This study contributes to positive social change by giving Kindergarten teachers a voice to share their best practices related to establishing and sustaining home-school partnerships with diverse parents. The researcher used this information to create a model that can be used by other Kindergarten teachers serving diverse populations. Giving successful teachers the opportunity to share their best practices was very important because Kindergarten marks the beginning of children's formal schooling and empowering parents to become involved in their children's education at this early age has the potential to enhance children's learning and development while also motivating parents to remain involved. As Epstein (1991) emphasized, parents who become involved in their children's education during the early childhood years are likely to maintain this involvement in the children's later schooling.

Summary

This chapter presented an introduction to the study, provided an explanation of the problem being investigated, and outlined the purpose of the study. Background information was presented to describe the Kindergarten Program (OME, 2006) in Ontario, Canada, and to explain why the TDSB was chosen for this study. The qualitative grounded theory approach was described, and the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the study were presented. In addition, the key terms used in this paper were operationally defined, and the potential significance of the study was described. The next

chapter presents a review of the literature that focuses on the many issues related to the topic of early reading skills and creating and sustaining home-school partnerships with parents, specifically those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Chapter 3 presents the methods and procedures used for this investigation, and it outlines the grounded theory approach, how the participants were selected, and the specific approaches used to collect and analyze the data. Chapter 4 focuses on the findings of this study and presents the themes that were gleaned from the data analysis. The final chapter presents an analysis and interpretation of the findings, a discussion of the implications of the findings, practical applications of study findings, recommendations for future research, and the implications for social change.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The early years of education are a critical period for establishing and developing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are essential in providing the foundations for lifelong learning. Research has shown that the first 6 years of children's lives are a time of unparalleled discovery. They learn about themselves and the world around them. Their personalities take shape as they begin to lay the foundation of knowledge so crucial in helping them have successful learning experiences at school (Walmsley & Walmsley, 1996). In addition, although children continue to develop reading skills throughout life, research has established that the early childhood years, from birth through age 8, are the most important period for literacy development (Sousa, 2005). Moreover, the Kindergarten Program (OME, 2006), a curriculum document for Kindergarten teachers in Ontario, Canada, affirms that early learning experiences have a profound influence on children's development and that children typically develop new knowledge by building on the experiences and skills they acquire in the home.

Researchers, policymakers, administrators, educators, and families must ensure that these early years are full of rich learning experiences for children so that the children develop the skills they will need to become effective, motivated, and lifelong learners. A very important aspect of supporting and enhancing children's learning in the early years is the home-school partnerships of parents, established and facilitated by teachers to give parents the support they may need to work with their children at home. At this point, it is

important to note that although the traditional definition of a parent refers to a child's biological mother or father, Morrison (1998) defined a parent as anyone who

> Provides children with basic care, direction, support, protection, and guidance…a parent can be single, married, heterosexual, homosexual, a cousin, aunt, uncle, grandparent, a court-appointed guardian, a brother, a sister, an institution employee, a surrogate, a foster parent, or a group such as a commune. (p. 472)

Therefore, as used here, *parent* refers to any individual who has primary custody of and responsibility for children. Also, the terms *family*, *parents*, *family involvement*, and *parental involvement* will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

The topic of home-school partnerships is multifaceted, and the broader discussion surrounding these partnerships is focused on student success and how schools and families can collaborate. The purpose of this study was to explore Kindergarten teachers' perceptions about establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to support children's development of early reading skills. The overall goal of this grounded theory study was to generate a model that all Kindergarten teachers can use to create and sustain home-school partnerships with diverse parents to promote children's development of vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness. This chapter presents a review of the literature germane to the topics of establishing and sustaining home-school partnerships with parents, children's development of reading skills, and parental involvement and its impact on children's reading achievement.

Although the topic of home-school partnerships encompasses many domains, the focus in this chapter is on exemplifying the absolute necessity for teachers to work in

partnership with parents to support children's development of early reading skills. The study was guided and framed by the following central research questions:

1. How do successful Kindergarten teachers define home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?
2. According to these Kindergarten teachers, in what ways do home-school partnerships support children's development of early reading skills?
3. What are some strategies that these Kindergarten teachers use to communicate with parents on a regular basis?
4. In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers reach out to parents to establish and facilitate partnerships with them?
5. In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers use home-school partnerships to support children's development of basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness?

To compile this literature review, several strategies were employed. The review was prepared by drawing upon a number of different sources to cover the topics of interest, including scholarly books, journals, transcripts from presentations, and online documents. To begin, it was noted that the issue of home-school partnerships related to children's development of early reading skills appeared in a number of professional and scholarly print and online journals ranging across the following subdisciplines: early childhood and family education, early intervention, elementary school journals, school psychology journals, urban and minority education, and bilingual education. Relevant articles from these sources were accessed. In addition, several scholarly books and

transcripts from presentations and conferences focusing on home-school partnerships with diverse families, children's development of reading skills, and the role of parental involvement in children's development of early reading skills also were accessed. Finally, a systematic and thorough search of electronic databases was conducted to access scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles. The key words used to conduct this search included diversity, communication, parent participation, parent involvement, parent school relations, parent teacher relations, parent-child reading, family involvement, family literacy, family influence, Kindergarten, early reading skills, emergent literacy, alphabet, phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, reading acquisition, reading achievement, and reading ability.

The review of the literature is organized in the following manner: (a) definition of home-school partnerships and the issues related to establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships, (b) trends and barriers related to establishing home-school partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse parents, (c) overview of children's development of reading skills, (d) role of joint book reading in children's development of early reading skills, and (e) parents' role in children's development of early reading skills.

Home-School Partnerships

Significance of Home-School Partnerships

Research has consistently shown that two of the most influential systems for young children are home and school. Both of these systems include sets of natural contributors that provide children with critical instruction and support that enable the

children to meet major developmental milestones and challenges (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Christenson and Sheridan reported that it is during the early childhood years that parent-teacher collaboration becomes absolutely critical as children begin their formal schooling experience in Kindergarten. This assertion was supported by Epstein (2001), who noted that not only have these home-school partnerships been shown to enhance children's motivation to learn but such partnerships also have been shown to promote children's development of key emergent skills that are instrumental in their academic success.

The notion that families play a meaningful role in children's educational success was supported by Bronfenbrenner (1991), who explained that the "informal education that takes place in the family is not merely a pleasant prelude, but rather a powerful prerequisite for success in formal education from the primary grades onward" (p. 5). As Bronfenbrenner elucidated, the home environment plays an instrumental role in setting the tone for lifelong learning. In addition, the Kindergarten Program (OME, 2006) acknowledged that children perform better in school if their parents are involved in their education. Parents provide a wealth of family tradition, knowledge, and experiences, so in this capacity, they are their children's first teachers.

With respect to reading, several dimensions of the family literacy environment come together to weave a complex tapestry of activities, experiences, and opportunities that promote children's acquisition of early reading skills, and parents play a vital role in the acquisition of these skills (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004). For example, the Commission on Reading (1985) concluded that "parents play roles of inestimable importance in laying

the foundation for learning to read…parents have an obligation to support their children's continued growth as readers" (p. 53). Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill (1991) also found that parents who actively support schools' efforts to teach their children are more successful in promoting their children's language and literacy achievements. Their study further indicated that families can greatly contribute to language and literacy development by forming a partnership with their children's schools. Therefore, in order to optimize the contributions that parents make to their children's learning, educators need to develop productive home-school partnerships with all parents.

Definition of Home-School Partnerships

In a home-school partnership, the input of both home and school is valued, and the focus is on what both parents and educators can do to promote student learning (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Therefore, a home-school partnership is a way of thinking about forming connections between families and schools, and the goal is to develop an intentional and ongoing relationship that is designed to enhance children's learning, and to address any obstacles that may impede this learning (Christenson & Sheridan). Christenson and Sheridan further emphasized that a home-school partnership is characterized by a mutual effort toward a shared goal and implies shared responsibility of families and educators working together to support students' learning. Forging this partnership requires the right attitude, and all partnerships between educators and parents must be guided by a student-focused philosophy wherein "educators and families cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate to enhance learning opportunities, educational progress, and school success for students" (Christenson & Sheridan, p. 37). Moreover,

Christenson (1995b) asserted that "home-school collaboration requires recognition by all involved that educational outcomes are influenced by events in the home, by events in school, and by the continuity between home and school environments" (p. 254).

Studies have shown that parent-teacher collaboration becomes critical during the early childhood years as children transition from home to Kindergarten (Christenson, 2002). Beneficial connections between home and school have been shown to enhance children's motivation to learn as well as the development of key emergent skills that are necessary for academic success in all areas (Christenson; Epstein, 1995). Research by Epstein (1991) suggested that parents who become involved with schools during the early childhood years are likely to maintain this involvement in the children's later schooling. Epstein (2001) further noted that such partnerships signal to children the value of education and provide the continuity between these two primary spheres of influence in children's lives.

Although parent and educator participation are essential to sustaining home-school partnerships, Knoff and Raffaele (1999) stated that the onus for establishing a successful home-school partnership rests with the educators. They commented that educators need to "examine the organizational climate that exists within schools and the messages about involvement that we send to parents" (p. 449). These same researchers asserted that the collaboration process should be proactive; a systematic approach should be taken to offer opportunities for parents to become involved in their children's education.

McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, and Sekino (2004) conducted a study to obtain a multidimensional picture of parent involvement in Kindergarten. Their findings indicated that the children of parents who spend more time with them at home talking about the importance of learning and reinforcing the skills that the children are learning at school demonstrate higher levels of social skills. In addition, compared to children of less involved parents, these children are more "cooperative, self-controlled, and pro-socially engaged in both home and school environments" (McWayne et al., p. 373). Moreover, these children demonstrate greater achievement in reading and mathematics as well as higher motivation for learning.

This study by McWayne et al. (2004) supported the important positive relationship between parent involvement and children's academic and social adjustment in school for a homogeneous group of low-income minority Kindergarten children and their families. Furthermore, this study highlighted the need for educators to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with parents so that parents have the support they need to work with their children at home, and to supplement and reinforce the learning that happens in school. Given that learning occurs across many settings and contexts, and that children spend more time out of school than they do in school, maximizing the extent to which these systems work together on behalf of children can close the achievement gap for all students, irrespective of their racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic background.

Models for Home-School Partnerships

Teachers have the unique opportunity to positively impact children's learning when they support parents as educators and acknowledge the importance of the time that parents spend working with their children at home. The research has shown that parents can be involved in their children's education in a number of different ways, and several excellent frameworks for involvement exist in the literature for school personnel to use when designing programs for their particular family-school context (Epstein, 1995).

According to Hill and Craft (2003), parent involvement can be classified into at least three categories. The first category, school-based involvement, includes volunteering in classrooms and participating in fundraising initiatives. The second category, home-school conferencing, includes communication between parents and teachers that focuses on specific issues related to children. The third category, home-based involvement, includes the activities that parents engage in with their children to promote and enhance their learning.

In addition to Hill and Craft (2003), Epstein (1995) also delineated six types of family-school involvement, underscoring the very important notion that families and schools can connect in many different ways, although she emphasized that all comprehensive partnership programs should include all six types of involvement. This notion was supported by Epstein's (2001) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, which suggests that schools, families, and communities are important contexts that simultaneously influence children's learning and that greater overlap among these environments benefits children's education and development. Furthermore, this model

emphasizes the cooperation of schools and families with each other, and encourages communication and collaboration between the two institutions.

According to Epstein (2001), the six types of involvement that can establish and strengthen a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships include the following:

1. Parenting: Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level.
2. Communicating: Communicate with families about school programs and student progress in varied, clear, and productive ways. Create two-way communication channels from school to home and from home to school so that families can easily keep in touch with teachers and other school staff.
3. Volunteering: Improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers within the school.
4. Learning at home: Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curricular related activities.
5. Decision making: Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils and other parent organizations.
6. Collaborating with the community: Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community businesses, agencies, and local colleges and universities in order to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. (pp. 43-44)

This typology of involvement provides a framework that schools can use to organize and evaluate efforts to involve parents in their children's education, thereby reducing the dissonance among the home, school, and community. However, for the purposes of this study, the focus was on learning at home, wherein teachers work with parents in partnership to ensure that parents have the support they may need to work with their children at home.

Trends and Barriers to Establishing Home-School Partnerships

Family involvement, when taken across all income and education levels, is a strong indicator of student achievement, and many parents foster a home environment that supports their children's academic achievement (J. A. Meyer & Mann, 2006). These parents may participate in their children's education by volunteering in the classroom, participating on the parent council, performing tasks at home to assist the teacher and to reinforce what the children are learning at school, or accompanying the class on field trips. However, other parents may not have the resources or the inclination to support their children's learning in these ways for a number of reasons. For example, many parents' schedules at work may not permit them the time to become involved in their children's academic lives. Others may have negative memories of their own school experiences and find school an uncomfortable place.

Another reason why parents may distance themselves from their children's school may be cultural: In some cultures, teachers are considered figures of authority, so questioning or approaching them is considered to be a sign of disrespect (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Pena, 2000). For example, Lee (2005) reported that Korean parents seldom approach teachers or administrators at their children's schools, even if they have very specific concerns that they want to address. When they do express their concerns, the statements are usually brief and polite. Lee clarified that it is common practice in the Korean culture to show support by being brief and by refraining from making any comments. However, this contradicts Western culture, which interprets silence as a sign of withdrawal and disengagement.

Although most educators agree with the value of family involvement, putting such relationships into action may be challenging, as indicated by the following research findings (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997):

1. Families are interested in and concerned about their children's learning. They want to be involved, but typically report not knowing what they might do at home to help their child be more successful at school.
2. Families from all strata, including those from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, are involved in supporting their children's education. However, families from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds often wait for guidance from educators before interacting with the school.
3. Educators generally value family involvement but report needing information on how to form collaborative partnerships with families.

In their study of why parents choose to become involved in their children's education, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found that parents' decisions and choices about becoming involved are based on several constructs drawn from their own ideas and experiences, as well as on other constructs stemming from environmental demands and opportunities. According to the findings of their study, most parents make the choice to become involved when they understand and accept that collaboration is part of their role as parents; when they believe that they can positively influence their children's education; and when the invitations, demands, and opportunities for

involvement are presented to them by the child and by the school. Therefore, teachers can play a central role in helping parents understand how children develop and learn, and the instrumental role that parents play in this learning and development process, especially with respect to the development of early reading skills (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler).

In recent years, parent involvement has become a greater challenge, and the literature suggested several specific impediments to establishing effective home-school partnerships. For example, Broussard (2003) reported that educators enter the field without concrete knowledge and skills about how to work effectively with diverse families, and how to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with them. In addition, she asserted that in many schools, the institutional culture devalues the participation of family members and expects all families to have the same values, beliefs, and attitudes as Euro-American families. Broussard stressed that without an understanding of the lifestyles and cultural backgrounds of diverse families, teachers simply assume that the families of the children in their classrooms embrace the same White middle-class norms, values, and beliefs as their own; therefore, they are unable to understand these parents and develop a positive connection with them.

In her qualitative study, Valdés (1996) documented that in the United States, teachers expect to encounter parents who are educated, who are familiar with how schools work, and who see their role as that of complementing the teachers' role in developing children's learning skills. As Valdés noted, the teachers in her study did not understand that "parents might not know the appropriate ways to communicate with the

teachers, that they might feel embarrassed about writing notes filled with errors, and that they might not understand how to interpret their children's report cards" (p. 214).

Lareau (1989) conducted an ethnographic study to compare family-school relations between upper middle-class and working-class families, and concluded that occupational status, education, and income critically affect parent involvement in the education experience of their children because of the way in which they perceive their roles in their children's education. Specifically, Lareau found that the working-class parents in the study believed that their role is simply to prepare children for school by teaching them manners and basic skills, and they did not believe that it is their place to intervene in their children's educational program. As a result, it may be challenging for teachers to establish reciprocal relations with parents who may see themselves as inadequately prepared to work with their children at home or who may perceive this type of involvement to go against their cultural traditions, values, and beliefs.

Therefore, teachers need to understand the importance of and be prepared to work with and involve all families in the education process, irrespective of their cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic background. In order to do so, however, teachers must be open in their approach, they must be willing to learn about the lifestyles and cultures of diverse families, and they must acknowledge that all families have strengths and the ability to make a positive contribution in their children's education. As Lareau (1989) emphasized, the more that educators know about parents' traditions, values, and beliefs, the more likely they are to develop programs that are responsive to the children they serve. Given the many ways in which parent involvement can support and enhance

children's learning, it is incumbent upon educators to focus their efforts on creative solutions to engage these parents in their children's learning.

Although there are many barriers that impede home-school partnerships, perhaps the greatest barrier to the establishment of such partnerships is language (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Given that a key component of a successful home-school partnership is communication that is clear, consistent, and positive (McCarthey, 2000), the language barrier needs to be overcome to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships. This is important because these differences in language can cause family members to feel uncomfortable and out of place in a setting where they are not easily understood. Furthermore, differences in language may make standard communication channels between home and school ineffective (Christenson & Sheridan).

In addition to linguistic barriers, differences in values held by schools and families may also cause barriers (Edwards, 2004). For example, cultural mismatches occur when values held sacred in one culture are misunderstood or invalidated in another. Likewise, tolerance for certain behaviors or levels of performance may differ within and across groups, and may result in very diverse conceptions of performance. Moreover, there may be times when parents and teachers disagree about the most effective methods in addressing concerns about children's learning or behavior, and parents may believe that teachers do not understand their preferences, but the teachers may feel that the parents are not cooperating with them. To offset and prevent such situations, Christenson and Sheridan (2001) recommended that there be ongoing open dialogue between parents and teachers to understand each other's perspectives.

The assumptions that educators make about families and families make about educators often result in attitudes that are conveyed through words and actions. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) explained that a "prerequisite to healthy and effective relationships is a set of assumptions about families that allows openness, fosters respect, and invites meaningful participation" (p. 90). In addition, McWayne et al. (2004) stressed that this partnership must include two-way communication and that educators' expectations of parents must be realistic given the familial context. As the researchers explained, if teachers' expectations are not in line with the multiple stressors that parents may be experiencing, the disconnect between the home and school will grow, which will be very disempowering for the parents.

Epstein (2001) reported that teachers' practices to involve families are as or more important than family background variables such as race or ethnicity, social class, marital status, or mother's work status in determining if and how parents become involved in their children's education. Furthermore, according to Dauber and Epstein (1991), surveys of parents, teachers, principals, and students have shown that if schools invest in practices to involve families, parents respond by conducting those practices. What is the most encouraging, however, is the observation that the parents who choose to become involved include those parents who might not otherwise have become involved (Dauber & Epstein). Epstein and Becker (1982) further reported that when teachers make parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interactions with their children at home, feel more positive about their abilities to help their children, and consider the teachers to be more competent.

Home-School Partnerships with Diverse Families

Working in a diverse society, teachers need to be cognizant of the fact that they will encounter families from different cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Therefore, teachers need to be willing and able to work in partnership with the parents of all the children they serve. In order to achieve this goal, however, teachers must learn about diverse family styles and cultural backgrounds, and realize that all families have strengths (Broussard, 2003).

Furthermore, as the research explicitly has indicated, the need to establish home-school partnerships and to engage parents in their children's learning is becoming a prerequisite for children's academic success (Epstein, 2001). This need becomes especially critical when educators are working with culturally and linguistically diverse families who may be new immigrants to the country, who may be unfamiliar with the system of education in their adopted country, and who may not speak English.

Therefore, to effectively establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse parents, and to be more receptive to including all families in this partnership and collaboration process, educators need to reexamine their

> Misconceptions about the ways families support children's learning, [their] fear of reaching out to families due to cultural or linguistic differences, [their] stereotypes about poor, minority families, and/or pitying families for their situations and therefore holding lower expectations for children's performance. (Esler, Godber, & Christenson, 2002, p. 396)

Also, by understanding the parents' and students' backgrounds, teachers are able to plan more appropriate activities for parents to use when working with their children at home. Research has indicated that children learn to read and write much more successfully

when teachers' instructional practice reflects the experiences and understandings that children bring with them to school. To gain this understanding, J. A. Meyer and Mann (2006) recommend that teachers should do home visits to establish positive relationships with parents, give parents an opportunity to ask questions, and observe the learning that happens in the home environment.

Esler et al. (2002) reported that the components that can aid in creating a climate that encourages the involvement of parents from diverse backgrounds include having social activities that include all families; reaching out into the community to establish more informal contacts with families; making school more family friendly by offering afterschool programs that involve parent, educator, and community volunteers; and recognizing and celebrating the diversity within a school. However, a problem arises when parents of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds do not have the confidence or the skills to help children with reading (Gilliam, Gerla, & Wright, 2004). Nevertheless, Powell (1989) reported that although this lack of confidence can be a deterrent to parental involvement, when parents are given the opportunities to be involved in their children's education, they become active and resourceful.

To date, much of the research examining parental involvement among diverse populations has suggested that parents do not have the ability or the interest to become involved in their children's education. For example, Hill and Craft (2003) reported that the differences between Euro-American and ethnically diverse samples often are interpreted from a deficit framework, so it is assumed that Euro-Americans are the "normative" group, and the ways in which ethnic minorities differ from Euro-Americans

are pathological or deviant. However, in Clark's (1983) study of high- and low-achieving high school students from low-income, urban, African-American families, he noted that the "leadership behavior and the sheer will" (p. 61) of the parents of high-achieving students, and factors such as parents making frequent school contacts and expecting to play a major role in their children's education, were critical in their academic success.

Moreover, Bartoli (1995) reported that the parents in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods were very concerned about their children's progress and behavior at school, and were particularly appreciative of teachers who kept them informed about all that was happening with their children at school. This was consistent with Epstein's (1993) research, which indicated that low-income families, like all other families, want their children to succeed. She explained that "data from the most economically depressed communities reveal that low income parents want their children to succeed, and that they need the school's help to know what to do with their children at each grade level" (p. 53).

Developing Reading Proficiency

The Imperative to Read

We live in a society in which the development of reading skills serves as the primary foundation for all school-based learning. Without the ability to read proficiently, children struggle in all areas of academia. Therefore, it is our moral and professional imperative as educators to ensure that our children learn to read competently at a young age so that as they get older, they are able to learn the skills they will need to thrive in the world outside of school.

According to Cunningham and Stanovich (1997), the ability to read proficiently is a crucial piece of the foundation for children's academic success, and they explained that children who are able to read early in their lives have many opportunities to experience print in a variety of different contexts. However, by the end of Kindergarten, the children who do not develop early reading skills, including, for example, a repertoire of basic vocabulary, an understanding of the alphabetic principle, and rudimentary phonological awareness, have less practice in reading, are unable to develop critical reading comprehension skills, and often encounter reading material that is much too advanced for them. This may lead to what Stanovich (1986) called the *Matthew effect*, a term he coined to describe the phenomenon that children who experience early difficulties in learning to read are likely to continue to experience reading problems throughout their school years that will impede their learning in all academic areas. This finding was supported by Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002), who emphasized that there is much evidence to show that early differences in these early reading skills are relatively stable from Kindergarten onward so that if children do not begin to acquire these skills in Kindergarten, they are likely to continue to struggle to learn how to read.

In Ontario, Canada, formal reading instruction begins when children enter Grade 1. To benefit from this formal reading instruction, it is very important that children acquire the critical early reading skills in Kindergarten. This contention was supported by Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002), who found that children whose early literacy skills are relatively good at the beginning of Kindergarten have better literacy skills early in Grade 1 and are more likely to be reading and decoding words independently by the end of

Grade 1. Also, Sénéchal and LeFevre argued that parental involvement in these early years, along with the work that parents do with their children to help them acquire these early reading skills, provides the basic groundwork for children's acquisition of the mechanics of reading.

Moreover, research has clearly shown that Kindergarten teachers cannot achieve this goal on their own and should work in partnership with parents to support children's development of early reading skills (de Jong & Leseman, 2001; Durkin, 1966; Neuman & Roskos, 1998). The teachers' challenge, then, is to find meaningful ways for all parents to engage their children in home literacy activities in order to promote the children's development of early reading skills. This challenge is magnified in a society where teachers are working with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Learning to Read

According to Sousa (2005), reading is a complex process that involves a variety of skills and abilities that enable individuals to construct linguistic meaning from written representations of language. This definition is in line with that of Wolfe and Nevills (2004), who stated that reading is a process of translating visual codes into meaningful language. Wolfe and Nevills further explained that in the earliest stages, reading in an alphabetic system such as English involves decoding letters into corresponding sounds and linking the sounds together to read the words.

Moreover, it is important to note that children need direct and guided instruction to become proficient and independent readers. This is largely because unlike speaking, reading is not an innate ability, and studies have indicated that there are no areas in the

brain that are programmed and specialized for reading (Sousa, 2005; Wolfe & Nevills, 2004). Nevertheless, as with speaking, learning to read begins very early in life; babies are fascinated by bright colorful books. Sousa commented that if adults share books with babies and talk about the pictures and words with them, the babies begin to develop early language skills, and they begin to understand the important connection between the text and the pictures in a book.

With respect to the actual act of reading, Wolfe and Nevills (2004) explained that reading is composed of two main processes: decoding and comprehension. They explained that decoding involves being able to "connect letter strings to the corresponding units of speech that they represent in order to make sense of print," whereas comprehension involves "higher-order cognitive and linguistic reasoning, including intelligence, vocabulary, and syntax, which allow children to gain meaning from what they read" (p. 9). Although reading can be described by the skills that enable children to read successfully, such as identifying letters and their sounds and decoding words, this does not constitute the act of reading.

According to the Commission on Reading (1985), "Reading can be said to take place only when the parts [skills] are put together in a smooth, integrated performance" (p. 7). Nevertheless, although this quote emphasizes the need to read fluently, it is possible for children learning English as a second language to decode the words they read fluently without understanding what they reading. This is particularly true in alphabetic languages that have a number of sound similarities, such as English and Spanish or French. When children decode fluently with little comprehension, teachers may

erroneously assume that the second language learner is reading at a higher level than is really the case. This can cause more dramatic problems later when context cues are reduced and the comprehension of text depends on extensive vocabulary and schema development. Therefore, when children, especially ELLs, are learning how to read, teachers and parents must work together to ensure that the children are equipped with the tools and strategies they will need to decode the words with automaticity while also understanding what they are reading. Sousa (2005) explained:

> Text comprehension is improved by direct, explicit instruction that helps readers use specific strategies to make sense of the passage. These strategies represent the purposeful steps that enable readers to reason strategically whenever they encounter barriers to understand what they are reading. (p. 97)

Consequently, it is important for children to learn how to decode words fluently and to comprehend what they are reading. Simply decoding words without meaning does not constitute reading. However, before children can begin to comprehend what they read, they need to have learned how to decode words quickly and effectively, and they must acquire the decoding skills that will develop their automaticity and speed at the word recognition level. This was supported by Cunningham and Stanovich (1997), who emphasized that slow, capacity-draining word recognition processes require cognitive resources that should be allocated to the higher level processes of text integration and comprehension. Therefore, early reading skills such as basic vocabulary acquisition, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness are key skills that enable children to learn how to decode words effectively and quickly so that the focus can then shift on teaching children how to read for meaning.

Early Reading Skills

Although there are many definitions in the literature related to early reading skills, they are essentially defined as the building blocks that young children require in order to begin learning how to read and, ultimately, to become proficient readers. Sousa (2005) emphasized that early reading skills refer to the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are necessary to develop reading and writing proficiency.

Research has indicated that although the development of oral language is an important precursor to reading, specific early reading skills, including basic vocabulary development (e.g., Sénéchal & Cornell, 1993); the alphabetic principle (e.g., Adams, 1990); and phonological awareness (e.g., Goswami & Bryant, 1990), have been identified as some of the most important early reading skills that children must acquire to begin learning how to read successfully. It must be noted, however, that learning to read is a complex process involving a large number of skills; therefore, in addition to vocabulary development, an understanding of the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness, children's expressive language, recognition of the letters of the alphabet, ability to name the letters rapidly, exposure to and awareness of the conventions of print, and knowledge of the purposes of books also are key predictors of later reading success (Adams; Chomsky, 1972; Wolfe & Nevills, 2004; Sousa, 2005). In addition, Purcell-Gates (1996) explained that children's understanding of conventions of print, such as the left-to-right and top-to-bottom orientation of print, also are important in their ability to be able to read proficiently, as is their understanding of the fact that print serves a specific purpose.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the knowledge base that is important for many aspects of psycholinguistic processing, and before children can benefit from focused reading instruction, they need to have learned some basic vocabulary (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Like Cunningham and Stanovich, Wagner et al. (1997) reported that vocabulary skills have a significant impact on decoding skills very early in the process of learning to read. In addition, researchers have long explained that talking to young children not only develops their vocabulary but also develops their background knowledge. However, the quality of adult-child discourse and the time spent on these interactions appear to be very important, and Dickinson et al. (1993) stressed that these conversations need to be cognitively challenging and vocabulary rich for literacy learning to occur. Therefore, teachers and parents must ensure that they are engaging children in conversations that support their vocabulary development.

Hart and Risley (2003) conducted a longitudinal study to document the vocabulary growth of 42 toddlers between the ages of 7 months and 9 months. The researchers followed the children until they turned 3 years old. In their study, they decided to include toddlers from families that belonged to three different socioeconomic groups because parental vocabulary is closely associated to socioeconomic status. Therefore, they included 13 families from a higher socioeconomic group, 23 families form a middle to lower socioeconomic group, and 6 families that were on welfare. The analysis of their findings showed that the children from the welfare families had an average recorded vocabulary of just 525 words, the children from the families that

belonged to the middle to lower socioeconomic group had 749 words, and the children from the families that belonged to the high socioeconomic group had an astounding 1,116 words.

To track the children's progress, Hart and Risley (2003) conducted a follow-up study on these children at the end of Grade 3 and discovered that the rate of early vocabulary growth was a strong predictor of scores on tests of vocabulary, listening, speaking, syntax, and semantics. This study highlighted the very important role of parents in their children's development of vocabulary during the early years, as well as the lasting effects of this vocabulary development on children's literacy learning and development.

In addition, Pinker (1997) explained that for most English-speaking children in Kindergarten, typically between the ages of 3 and 5, vocabulary acquisition continues to grow at a rapid pace. By age 5, children will have learned between 3,000 and 8,000 words. It has been reported that an average 6-year-old child will have acquired over 13,000 words. Although studies have shown that reading to bilingual children learning English as a second language can help them to develop their vocabulary (Collins, 2005), the aforementioned information about children's vocabulary acquisition does not apply to children learning English as a second language. Nevertheless, Pinker purported that most children this age enjoy listening to stories, talking about stories, identifying familiar signs and labels, and participating in rhyming games, and that they are beginning to understand that print carries specific messages. Pinker emphasized that this is the best age to focus on helping children acquire new vocabulary. However, Bredekamp (1987) explained that

this type of linguistic awareness is best developed within the context of the child's work and play; as a result, the child's environment should provide many opportunities to hear and play with language.

Although the research on how parents from diverse backgrounds can support their children's development of vocabulary is limited, De Temple (1994) conducted a longitudinal study with low-income mothers who read to their Kindergarten-aged children regularly and found that when the mothers included talk about aspects of the story, its characters, and how these related to the children's lives, there was a positive correlation between this talk that accompanied book reading and the Kindergarten children's receptive vocabulary and story comprehension. De Temple also discovered that when parents simply focus on the mechanics of the reading activity or read the text without much comment, the benefits of these shared reading activities diminished significantly.

In addition to supporting reading acquisition, vocabulary development has long been considered important for reading comprehension; as Biemiller and Boote (2006) argued, vocabulary should explicitly be taught to children in the primary grades. They explained that although children may be able to decode words efficiently, their comprehension will suffer if they have limited vocabulary knowledge. For example, Scarborough (1998) reported that children with restricted oral vocabularies comprehend at lower levels. Scarborough further indicated that vocabulary size in Kindergarten is an effective predictor of reading comprehension in the middle elementary years, that orally tested vocabulary at the end of Grade 1 is a significant predictor of reading

comprehension 10 years later, and that children with restricted vocabulary by Grade 3 have declining comprehension scores in the later elementary years.

Further support for vocabulary's role as the connecting link between decoding and comprehension was offered by Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin (1990). They found that many Grade 3 students from working-class families had mastered decoding skills and could comprehend grade-level materials. When these children reached Grade 7, however, their decoding skills remained good, but their poor vocabulary impeded their reading comprehension. Similarly, Cunningham and Stanovich (1997), in a longitudinal study, found that vocabulary knowledge in Grade 1 accounts for more than 30% of the variance in reading comprehension in Grade 1.

Alphabetic Principle

In addition to basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle also has been identified as a key early reading skill that enables young children to benefit from formal reading instruction in all alphabetic languages (e.g., Adams, 1990). According to Adams, young children must internalize the alphabetic principle and understand that letters are used to represent speech sounds, or phonemes, and that there are systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken words. Adams further explained that in order to begin learning how to read, children must accurately name and recognize letters of the alphabet, and they must be able to recognize these letters in many different contexts.

This finding was supported by Scarborough (1998), who analyzed 61 prediction studies of young readers who were fluent in English. Based on the results of these 61

studies, he concluded that the best predictor of future reading success was the child's current level of skill with printed letters and words. Moreover, for preliterate children, Scarborough found that a measure of letter naming by itself accounted for an average of 35% of the variance in later reading. It is important to note, however, that the alphabetic principle requires that children begin to connect the sounds to their graphic representations so that it involves more than just recognizing letters in a variety of contexts. The connection between graphic symbol and speech sounds must be present for the alphabetic principle to be mastered.

Adams (1990) emphasized that in addition to internalizing the alphabetic principle, in order for children to develop reading proficiency, they also must learn basic concepts about print, phonological awareness, automatic word recognition, and vocabulary, and they must understand the syntactic and semantic relationships among words to achieve reading comprehension. Adams further asserted that although automatic and speedy word recognition is an essential skill for reading comprehension, this automaticity depends on the readers' knowledge and fluency with letter-to-sound translation, common syllable spelling patterns, and sight word knowledge.

Research also has suggested that there is a strong and reciprocal relationship between an understanding of the alphabetic principle and the development of phonemic awareness. For example, in preschool children, phonemic awareness appears to develop around the same time as the acquisition of the knowledge that there is a connection between letters and sounds (e.g., Stanovich, 1994). In addition, Whitehurst, Epstein, et al. (1994) explained that the home environment plays a critical role in helping children learn

these letter names and their corresponding sounds. This assertion is supported by the findings of their study, wherein 4-year-old children in Headstart were randomly assigned to an emergent literacy curriculum that included a home literacy component. The results of this study indicated that these children demonstrated significant gains in letter-sound knowledge compared to children who did not experience the home intervention (Whitehurst, Epstein, et al.). Finally, new readers must learn the alphabetic principle and recognize that words can be separated into individual phonemes, which can then be reordered and blended into new words. Early instruction in reading, especially in letter-sound association, strengthens phonological awareness and helps in the development of phonemic awareness (Scarborough, 1998).

Phonological Awareness

In the literature, there is clear consensus that in order for children to learn how to read, the development of phonological awareness is essential, and this is true for both native English speakers and ELLs (Bialystok & Herman, 1999). Bialystok and Herman asserted that "phonological awareness has repeatedly and independently been shown to underlie access to literacy and to assure progress into fluent reading" (p. 41). In addition, although there is much information in the literature relating to the cognitive processes involved in reading acquisition, perhaps the most significant information identifies the fact that children must accurately and efficiently recognize individual words in order to develop fluency and reading comprehension (e.g., Adams, 1990). One of the major cognitive determinants of word-reading skills in the early phases of learning to read is phonological awareness (Goswami & Bryant, 1990).

Phonological awareness is the understanding that oral language can be divided into smaller components, such as sentences into words; words into syllables; and finally, into individual phonemes (Sousa, 2005). In young children, phonological awareness usually begins with initial sounds and rhyming, and continues with the development of an awareness of alliteration, syllabication, and intonation (Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Sousa). However, in order to be phonologically aware, children must have an understanding of all these levels, and Bialystok and Herman (1999) emphasized that to begin learning how to read, children must develop this important skill. This is largely because in early reading acquisition, the emphasis is primarily on word decoding, which refers to the technical ability to decipher written words. Once children learn how to decode words, the focus then shifts to reading comprehension, wherein children have to understand the meaning of what they are reading (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004).

With respect to word decoding, a large body of research has indicated that children's ability to decode words is predicted by their phonological skills and their ability to name letters and associate these letters with their corresponding sounds (e.g., Adams, 1990; Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001; Goswami & Bryant, 1990). Learning this connection between the sounds of speech and print is a critical prerequisite to effective word identification, and the understanding that there is a direct relationship between letters and sounds enables a reader to retrieve the pronunciation of an unknown word and associate it with a spoken word. Moreover, understanding the relationship of letters and sounds also is the foundation of learning to spell (Torgesen, 2002).

In addition, phonological awareness is a powerful predictor of the speed and efficiency of reading acquisition, and studies have empirically linked individual differences in phonological awareness to the acquisition of reading skills, showing that the children who are better at detecting phonemes learn to decode words easily and quickly (e.g., Bus & van Ijzendoorn, 1999; Wimmer, Landerl, Linorter, & Hummer, 1991). For example, Wimmer et al. investigated individual differences in English-speaking children's development of phonological awareness and discovered that the children who had developed this awareness, either by spontaneous discovery through spoken language or through explicit instruction, were more skilled in reading and spelling by the end of Grade 1 than the children who had not developed this skill.

Bialystok and Herman (1999) suggested that if phonological awareness develops through intrinsic sensitivity to the sounds of language stimulated by, for example, language games, it is plausible that bilingual children could potentially have greater phonological awareness than monolingual children because they have had greater opportunities to engage in activities that promote the development of phonological awareness in their early years. A discussion of the development of phonological awareness skills for ELLs follows in the next section.

Reading and ELLs

An increasing number of children from diverse linguistic backgrounds who speak very limited to no English are entering Kindergarten. These children, referred to as ELLs, are entering Kindergarten with little or no exposure to English and, upon school entry, are

immersed in mainstream English classrooms (Lesaux, Rupp, & Siegel, 2007). According to the OME (2007), ELLs are defined as

> Students in provincially funded English language schools whose first language is a language other than English, or is a variety of English that is significantly different from the variety used for instruction in Ontario's schools, and who may require focused educational supports to assist them in attaining proficiency in English. (p. 6)

As is evident from this definition, ELLs are not necessarily students who are learning English as a new second language; rather, it also includes those students who speak a different type of English. For example, Jamaican-English is very different from the English spoken in Ontario, Canada and, according to this document, students speaking this type of English would also be considered ELLs.

For children who are learning English as a second language, learning to read in English is very challenging because of the orthography of the English language. Unlike languages like Spanish, letters in English can represent several different sounds. Moreover, there are many examples of spelling patterns in the English language that do not follow the sound-symbol relationship (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004). Therefore, teaching children to read in a language in which they are not yet proficient has been identified as an additional risk factor for reading problems (Lesaux & Siegel, 2003).

However, the results of a study by Fitzgerald and Noblit (1999) suggested that just as the development of speaking, reading, and writing skills are interrelated in the emerging literacy of native English speakers, these skills are equally related in the emerging literacy of children learning English as a second language. As a result, Fitzgerald and Noblit purported that a literacy-rich school and home environment can

capitalize on this relationship and help children learning English as a second language to develop the early literacy skills they need to become successful readers and writers. Most importantly, however, McCollin and O'Shea (2005) asserted that when "early reading opportunities are culturally and linguistically relevant, students can profit enormously from explicit instruction in awareness of the various parts of the spoken language before proceeding to the meaning of the written word or text" (p. 41).

Although a very limited number of studies have been conducted to investigate the development of reading skills in children who receive classroom instruction in a language other than their native language, the results of prior studies have shown that the reading developmental trajectories of these children are very similar to those of native speakers across different languages (e.g., Bialystok, 1997; Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999). For example, Fitzgerald and Noblit observed that children in Kindergarten with limited English language proficiency who were immersed in a balanced literacy program, defined as a program that gives equal weight to phonics and integrated language instruction (e.g., Ehri et al., 2001), were able to develop reading and writing skills throughout the school year, and they observed that the emergent literacy behaviors of these children developed in much the same way as they did for native English speakers. Similarly, Chiappe and Siegel (1999) examined the performance of Punjabi-speaking ELLs and native English-speaking children in Grade 1, and they reported that word recognition skills and phonological processing skills were not significantly different across the two language groups.

Moreover, as with English-speaking children, phonological awareness is a powerful predictor of the speed and efficiency of reading acquisition for children who are ELLs (Bialystok & Herman, 1999; Ehri et al., 2001). Bialystok (1997) reported that for children learning English as a second language, phonological awareness is a stronger, better predictor of reading performance than is oral language proficiency.

Research that has focused on the cross-language transfer of phonological awareness from the native language to the second language has indicated that phonological awareness skills transfer from the first to the second language, provided that both languages have comparable writing systems and are based on similar sound systems (e.g., Bialystok & Herman, 1999; Bialystok, McBride-Chang, & Luk, 2005; Chiappe & Siegel, 1999). However, bilingual children have been observed to have an advantage compared to monolingual children when it comes to acquiring phonological awareness. For example, Rubin and Turner (1989) compared the phonological awareness of native English-speaking Grade 1 children with that of children in French immersion programs who were receiving all their instruction in French. Rubin and Turner found that the children in the French immersion programs had greater phonological awareness than the English-speaking children.

Campbell and Sais (1995) conducted a similar study in which they used a series of phonological awareness tasks and tested bilingual preschool children who spoke Italian in their homes but received instruction in English at school. As with Rubin and Turner (1989), Campbell and Sais also found that the bilingual children performed better than the children who spoke only English. Therefore, the results of these studies showed that

in general, bilingualism can facilitate sensitivity to sound, leading to enhanced phonological awareness, indicating that bilingual children are more prepared than monolingual children for learning to read (Bialystok & Herman, 1999).

Parents often are concerned that children will lose their native language if they consistently interact with them in English, and Wong-Fillmore (1991) noted that young children inevitably lose their native language when it is not extensively used for instructional purposes. Therefore, teachers should encourage parents to send their children to heritage classes where their native language is taught. It is important for the children to learn their native language, and this notion has been supported by the results of studies with young bilingual children, which have indicated that when children are exposed to two languages, this bilingualism facilitates the acquisition of language-related skills such as reading and writing (e.g., Bialystok, 1997; Wong-Fillmore).

Similarly, Cummins (1989) reported that instruction in students' native language simultaneously promotes the development of literacy skills in both the native language and a second language. Cummins also explained that learning to read in their native language is beneficial for students learning English as a second language because the students can apply many of the skills and strategies they acquired to read in their native language to reading in English. This assertion was supported by Lesaux and Siegel (2003), who stated that for students in Kindergarten who are learning English as a second language, explicit skills instruction is critical to helping them become proficient readers, and they strongly argued that bilingualism is not an impediment to the acquisition of early reading skills.

Nevertheless, Bialystok et al. (2005) reported that it is methodologically very challenging to study how reading develops in bilingual children because

> Bilingualism is not a categorical variable that neatly divides populations into two groups. It is, rather, a continuous dimension that describes the relative proficiency that a person holds over two languages…developmental research has found that the degree to which a child is bilingual is crucial in determining the cognitive and linguistic consequences of bilingualism. (p. 581)

Moreover, this challenge is compounded by the fact that research examining the transfer of reading skills has been conducted with children who represent a variety of bilingual experiences and include, for example, both bilinguals and second language learners (Bialystok et al.). However, Bialystok et al. explained that reading acquisition might proceed more efficiently for bilingual children than for monolingual children because of the earlier establishment of prerequisite skills in bilingual children and the possibility of skill transfer across languages.

The need to support children's development of skills in their first language is supported by the OME (2007), which stresses that teachers and parents must work together in partnership to support the continued development of the first language for the following reasons:

1. Conversing in their first language enables children to develop world knowledge and vocabulary.
2. The knowledge gained from the first language will transfer into the second language. For example, as Cummins (1989) explained, learning to read in their native language helps students as they learn how to read in English because they can apply many of the skills and strategies they acquired to

read in their native language to reading in English. This finding was supported by Lindholm-Leary (2006), who reported that instructional strategies and reading activities that use the children's native language are more effective than English-only instruction.

3. Reading and storytelling in their first language models literacy processes.

It is not surprising, then, that one of the expectations of the OME (2006) for teachers in Ontario, Canada is to encourage parents to continue to use their own language at home in rich and varied ways as a foundation for language and literacy development in English.

Finally, children who learn to read in a language different from the one spoken at home face an enormous challenge. There is not much information available on how these children learn to read, so the general practice has been to apply what is known about cognitive processes that apply to reading for monolingual children to bilingual or multilingual children (Manis, Lindsey, & Bailey, 2004). Nevertheless, although research on the transfer of early reading-related skills from one language to another has not been extensive, there is growing evidence for the cross-language transfer of phonological awareness (e.g., August, Calderon, & Carlo, 2001); single-word reading errors and fluency (e.g., August et al.; Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003); and reading comprehension (e.g., Lindsey et al.).

For example, Manis et al. (2004) investigated the contribution of early linguistic skills to reading achievement in a biliterate context. Their study sample consisted of 303 Latino Kindergarten children randomly chosen from schools located in a Texas border

town who had very limited knowledge of English at the beginning of the Kindergarten year, as determined by language assessment tests. For the first 1.5 years of the study, the children were given intensive Spanish literacy training, after which they were transitioned to a parallel program in English literacy. The results of this study indicated that print knowledge, phonological awareness, and rapid naming correlated cross-linguistically with later reading achievement. However, expressive language showed a stronger within- than across-language relationship to later reading.

Joint Book Reading

Many studies on the role of parent-child book reading on the development of early literacy skills have focused on monolingual children. These studies have shown that books and interactive reading activities between parents and children strongly support children's reading achievement and that reading aloud to children is contended to be the most important activity that supports the development of their literacy skills (e.g., Bus et al., 1995; Bus, Leseman, & Keultjes, 2000; de Jong & Leseman, 2001; Sénéchal, 2006). Chomsky (1972) emphasized that the most important activity that parents and educators can use to build children's knowledge and skills required for reading is reading aloud to them.

In addition, Bus et al. (1995) conducted the first quantitative meta-analysis of joint book reading between parents and their preschoolers to determine if the evidence supports the notion proposed by the Commission on Reading (1985) that reading aloud to children by engaging them in joint book reading is "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading" (p. 23). The results of

their analysis indicated that the amount of time parents read with their preschoolers was related to outcome measures such as language growth, emergent literacy, and in-school reading achievement, and they concluded that frequency of parent-child book reading fosters preparedness for reading achievement in the early school years and beyond.

However, although this meta-analysis by Bus et al. (1995) included studies that were conducted with a largely English-speaking sample, Kalia (2007) examined the role of Indian bilingual parents' book reading practices on the development of their children's oral language and literacy skills in English, which was their second language. Kalia's sample included 24 bilingual children in Bangalore, India, and their parents. The parents were asked to report on the frequency of book reading activities in the home and their children's receptive vocabulary, phonological awareness, complex syntax, narrative expression, and concepts about print were assessed using several language tests. As with the many studies that have focused on monolingual children (e.g., Bus et al., 1995; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Hudson, & Lawson, 1996), Kalia found that book reading activities in the home support bilingual children's development of many early literacy skills including, for example, the bilingual children's oral language and literacy development in their second language.

Similarly, Collins (2005) conducted a study with 70 preschoolers who spoke Portuguese and who were leaning English as a second language. These children were exposed to a pair of stories three times a week for a 3-week period. During these reading sessions, rich descriptions of specific vocabulary words that appeared in these stories were shared with the children. According to Collins, these rich descriptions consisted of

pointing to the pictures, providing a brief definition of the word, using a synonym, using an action to show the meaning of the word, and using the word in a new sentence. The results of the study, based on the Picture Peabody Vocabulary Test-III (1997), indicated that this type of reading activity led to significant gains in these children's vocabulary acquisition. Most importantly, however, Collins reported that this type of vocabulary instruction was also observed to be beneficial for ELLs, who have very limited knowledge of the English language and who are just beginning to learn the English language.

Like Collins (2005), Wolfe and Nevills (2004) explained that reading to children increases their vocabulary and helps them become familiar with language patterns. According to Sénéchal and Cornell (1993), Kindergarten-aged children can learn new receptive vocabulary from a single exposure to a storybook. However, Sénéchal and Cornell restricted their study to children who spoke English as their first language, so their findings may not apply to ELLs. Nevertheless, as Collins reported, children who are just beginning to learn English also have shown gains in vocabulary acquisition as a result of being read to on a regular basis.

Although the research has shown that reading to both English-speaking children and ELLs can facilitate vocabulary acquisition, Sénéchal et al. (1996) explained that there are a number of important reasons why shared reading can facilitate vocabulary acquisition. First, the words used in stories often are words that children do not encounter in their spoken language, and these words are typically more sophisticated than the words used by adults when they communicate with children. Second, the focused interactions

between adults and children during these reading sessions can facilitate children's ability to acquire new information.

Raikes et al. (2006) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between mother-child book reading in low-income families and the influence of these reading activities on the children's language and cognitive development at 14, 24, and 36 months. This study included 2,581 mothers from low-income families and from diverse backgrounds. Thirty-seven percent of the mothers were White, 34% were African-American, 17% were non-English-speaking Hispanic, and 4% were members of other racial or ethnic groups. Path analyses of the results revealed positive, reciprocal relationships between concurrent book reading activities and children's vocabulary. However, Raikes et al. found that the Hispanic and African-American mothers were less likely than the White, non-Hispanic mothers to read to their children. This finding was supported by Yarosz and Barnett (2001), who reported that only 48% of mothers whose home language was not English read to 3- to 5-year-old children (i.e., Kindergarten-aged children), compared with 84% of mothers whose home language was English.

Therefore, given these results, teachers must work with parents, especially those who struggle with the English language, and provide them with the support and tools they may need to engage in these book reading activities at home. As Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) reported, if parents understand how important their involvement is to their child's learning and if they believe they have to support they need to become involved, they are much likely to initiate this involvement. The benefits of parent-child book reading activities also were supported by Sénéchal and Thomas (1995), who reported that

storybook exposure explained unique variance in vocabulary knowledge for English-speaking children after controlling for some cognitive factors, including children's analytic intelligence and some environment factors such as the parents' socioeconomic status.

This finding was supported by Swinson (1985), who found that parents who were encouraged to read to their preschool-aged children daily over a 9-month period had children whose vocabulary scores improved during the project, whereas the scores of children whose parents had not been encouraged to read to them daily were not significantly enhanced. Biemiller and Boote (2006) emphasized that vocabulary, or the knowledge of word meanings, is critical because it serves as a powerful predictor of reading comprehension. They argued that vocabulary must explicitly be taught to children to prevent the vocabulary gaps that have been shown to exist before children even begin Kindergarten from increasing (Hart & Risley, 2003).

Numerous researchers (e.g., Bus et al., 1995) proposed that reading-related activities in the home should include more than just storybook reading. Teachers should encourage parents to work with their children to help them develop critical early reading skills, including knowledge of letter names; connections between letters and sounds (i.e., alphabetic principle); phonological awareness; and vocabulary. Numerous studies have identified these skills as instrumental in helping children benefit from formal reading instruction (e.g., Ehri et al., 2001; Goswami & Bryant, 1990).

Evans, Shaw, and Bell (2000) studied the types of reading literacy-related activities chosen by parents that influence children's development of early reading skills.

The results of this study showed that although joint reading activities at home increased children's vocabulary, other literacy skills such as letter name knowledge and phonological awareness were not enhanced by simple reading activities. Rather, parental reports of the frequency of home activities that involved letters of the alphabet, such as learning letter names and sounds and printing letters, predicted the children's knowledge of letter names and phonological awareness. This finding was supported by Lonigan and Whitehurst (1998), who reported that although vocabulary development and emergent concepts about print are enhanced by book reading activities, early reading skills such as identifying letters of the alphabet and understanding the connection between the letters and their corresponding sounds require instruction, activities, and materials that focus specifically on these skills.

Whitehurst, Arnold, et al. (1994) found that the frequency of book reading at home influenced children's vocabulary development while explicitly teaching alphabet knowledge influenced reading and writing skills. Similarly, Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas, and Daley (1998) reported that Kindergarten and Grade 1 children's written language knowledge, including print concepts, letter knowledge, invented spelling, and work identification, was associated with parental attempts to teach their children about print, but not with book reading activities. These studies identified very specific associations between different types of home literacy activities and the development of various early literacy skills.

In addition to the reading-related skills that they learn through joint book reading sessions with their parents, reading to children regularly familiarizes them with the

reading process, and they learn, for example, the many conventions of print, such as how to hold books accurately, how the pictures and words are related, and how to turn pages. During these reading sessions, parents can point to individual words, direct children's attention to where to begin reading, and help children recognize letter shapes and sounds (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004). Moreover, the benefits of reading to children are greatly enhanced when the reader involves the child in the reading process, encourages the child to retell the story, and involves the child in a discussion about the story. In addition, reading a variety of different books and genres is a very good way to build children's background knowledge (Wolfe & Nevills).

Reading aloud to children also has been observed to help them develop a sense of story and, over time, they learn that stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end, a key skill for comprehension of narrative (Bus et al., 1995). Moreover, as Wolfe and Nevills (2004) and Bus et al. explained, many functions related to children's future success with reading are served by reading aloud to children. For example, some of the many benefits of joint book reading include the following:

1. Reading to children regularly makes it an enjoyable activity and promotes positive feelings and books.
2. Exposing children to books from a variety of genres develops children's background knowledge about a variety of topics.
3. Reading aloud to children is a great way to build their vocabulary because it creates opportunities for parents to introduce their children to new words and to explain their meaning.

4. When young children are read to regularly, they begin to engage in "pretend" reading, wherein in they pretend that they are reading the story, even though they are not able to decode the words. This type of pretend reading indicates that children are beginning to demonstrate their understanding of the fact that print contained on a page serves a specific purpose.
5. Reading to children provides parents with an authentic opportunity to engage them in critical thinking because during these reading sessions, parents have the opportunity to ask their children questions related to, for example, the characters' actions, feelings, and situations.

In addition to these benefits of joint book reading sessions between children and their parents, Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) reported that the talk that surrounds these reading sessions between parents and children is what greatly promotes children's vocabulary development and their understanding of the meanings of different words. When parents ask open-ended questions related to the book, invite discussions on the potential definitions of new words, and encourage children to reflect on the stories read, children become engaged and intrinsically motivated to look at books and to learn to read.

Finally, it is clear that the children who become proficient readers come from homes in which their parents have read to them regularly. Frequent book reading activities at home help children to become familiar with book language, recognize the function of written language, and build a desire and interest in reading. Although many

parents may be aware of the influence of book reading activities on children's development of early reading and literacy skills, teachers need to share these facts with parents and encourage them to read to their children daily.

Parental Involvement and Early Reading Skills

Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, and Weiss (2006) found that increased parent involvement between Kindergarten and Grade 5 is associated with increased literacy performance, and that high levels of this type of parent involvement may have added benefits for children from low-income families. Dearing et al. also reported that some children who are at greater risk for academic underachievement would benefit more from family educational involvement. Understanding how the home environment can influence children's development of early reading skills is increasingly becoming an area of interest for educators, families, and researchers. This is largely because of the observation that children who successfully acquire early reading skills tend to remain good readers, whereas the children who struggle early on with learning to read tend to continue to have difficulty with reading throughout their school years (Adams, 1990; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997).

Kindergarten marks the beginning of a core transition in the life of young learners, and the early reading skills that children learn in Kindergarten enable them to benefit from formal reading instruction, which in Ontario, Canada, begins in Grade 1. According to Neuman and Roskos (1998), early literacy learning is a highly social activity, and parents have many opportunities to promote their children's acquisition of early reading skills. For example, parents can provide vital literacy learning opportunities

by having suitable materials for children to use, such as age-appropriate books. In addition, parents can interact with children to support their learning and challenge them to move along their respective zones of proximal development.

Moreover, for younger children who have not yet learned to read, direct instruction of early literacy skills by parents has been found to contribute to the acquisition of these skills. For example, Jackson, Donaldson, and Cleland (1988) reported that 95% of the parents of proficient readers reported having spent time identifying letter sounds for their children. In addition, Durkin (1966) reported that 67% of the parents of proficient readers in her study reported having taught their children letter names. These findings indicated that the work that parents do with their children at home related to these early reading skills can help them to learn these skills.

As Neuman and Roskos (1998) reported, LeFevre and Sénéchal (1999) also found that home literacy experiences have a direct impact on children's development of early language and literacy skills, and that different kinds of informal and formal home literacy experiences are related to the acquisition of different kinds of skills. However, it is important to distinguish between informal and formal literacy experiences. According to Sénéchal (2006), informal literacy experiences expose children to written language incidentally, such as when children listen to an adult read a storybook. Such experiences may promote language development in children because of the richness of the text in these books, because of parents asking questions and providing definitions of words and concepts that appear in the book, and because of repeated exposure to specific books (Sénéchal). In contrast, formal literacy experiences focus directly on the written

language, and examples include parents teaching their children the alphabet and how to print their names. The focus of such activities is on the actual structure of written language (Sénéchal).

According to Sénéchal (2006), children's informal experiences with literacy seem to contribute to the development of their oral language skills, such as their vocabulary, whereas more formal experiences with print seem to contribute to the development of their early literacy skills, such as their knowledge of letter names. Moreover, Sénéchal explained that these informal and formal literacy experiences contribute to children's reading achievement in two ways. First, through these literacy experiences, parents are able to promote their children's development of new vocabulary by reading to them regularly, and, second, parents are able to work with their children to teach them the alphabet and how to read and print simple words. These skills, Sénéchal stressed, enable children to begin to acquire critical early literacy skills that are important in helping young children learn how to read.

Similarly, Becher (1986) explained that literacy learning begins at home and that instruction at school builds on what the children learn at home. According to Becher, children who are raised in environments where oral language is encouraged and where their parents foster a love for reading by exposing them to books are provided with the building blocks to become lifelong readers and learners. Therefore, parents can act as powerful models for their children when they engage in such activities as reading the newspaper, writing shopping lists, reading instructions, and talking about the importance of reading and writing (Neuman & Roskos, 1998). Parental activities that afford children

opportunities to learn are important in children's acquisition of reading skills. This was supported by the findings of Sénéchal et al. (1998), who indicated that the frequency with which parents reported teaching their child to print and read words was related to early literacy measures such as alphabet knowledge, beginning reading, and invented spelling.

D. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) conducted an ethnographic study of the family lives of five families of low socioeconomic groups whose children were successful in school. Their study revealed that these children participated in story and Bible reading events and observed their parents writing in journals, reading newspapers and magazines, and communicating with the teachers at their school. These children had many experiences with literacy, and this influenced their interest and motivation in learning how to read.

Scarborough, Dobrich, and Hager (1991) also found that the children in their study who became poor readers had accumulated substantially less experience with books and reading than those who became better readers. In addition, they reported that the preschoolers who were read to more in the home and who participated in more solitary book activities at home became better readers than preschoolers with fewer experiences with reading at home by Grade 2 (Scarborough et al.). Moreover, Bus et al. (1995) emphasized that for children to enjoy shared or joint book reading activities, parents must ensure that their interactions with their children are positive and engaging. However, based on a discriminant analysis of joint book reading practices in culturally diverse families, these interactions vary between families and cultural groups. Therefore, parents need to understand the importance of their interaction styles, and teachers can support

parents by coaching them on how to interact with their children when engaging in book reading activities at home.

Given the paramount role that language and literacy play in children's future academic development and success, it is critical to understand how teachers can work with parents in partnership to support children's development of early reading skills. However, although the vast majority of parents want their children to be successful in school, many do not know how to assist their children in ways that can improve and enhance their school performance (Epstein, 1986). Therefore, if teachers work with parents in partnership, there is much that they can do to support children's early learning and their development of early reading skills.

Recent research on children's literacy development by comparing more and less effective schools has demonstrated the importance of school-wide efforts to communicate with and involve parents in their children's literacy development (B. M. Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999). B. M. Taylor et al. reported that in addition to appropriate classroom instruction, the most effective schools consistently reached out to parents to help them become involved in their children's literacy learning. This is of critical importance, as Baker et al. (1996) explained:

> Home-school partnerships can have a positive effect on literacy if families and teachers together develop ways of communicating and building meaningful curricula that extend the insular classroom community. The key elements of reciprocity and respect must be locally interpreted and jointly constructed by parents and teachers. (p. 38)

Training Programs for Parents

Whitehurst et al. (1988) reported that when parents were taught specific strategies and activities to use when reading to their children, their children scored significantly higher on tests of verbal expression and vocabulary than those children who were only read to, but were not engaged in any activities. Similarly, Toomey (1993) reported that providing parents with simple but specific techniques showed greater benefits for children at risk for reading failure than did providing parents with general information and general reading strategies. Evans et al. (2000) found that in a sample typical of average Ontario demographics, shared book reading between parents and children in which parents had not been coached on specific instructional activities did not significantly advance the children's vocabulary. In addition, these shared reading activities did not appear to help children learn letter names and letter sounds, skills that they must acquire in order to learn how to read.

Whitehurst, Epstein, et al. (1994) focused on the early literacy development of children from low-income families. They taught mothers specific interactive strategies to use when reading picture books with their young children. This intervention program, called dialogic reading, involved parents reading with their children rather than to their children or correcting their children's reading. Also, the parents were asked to engage in a dialogue with their children about the content and context of the story and allow their children to direct and share in the conversations associated with the text and pictures (Whitehurst, Epstein, et al.). The premise behind this dialogic reading intervention program was to enable parents to expand on children's dialogue while giving the children

an opportunity to practice this linguistically enhanced dialogue as opposed to passively listening to parents read.

According to Whitehurst, Epstein, et al. (1994), these dialogic reading interactions were instrumental in helping children connect reading with positive parental social interactions and attention; for the parents, these dialogic reading interactions facilitated confidence and involvement in the children's reading acquisition process. Furthermore, these dialogic reading interactions also resulted in gains in vocabulary, comprehension strategies, story schema, and concept development. Given the many benefits of this reading program for children and their parents, it is not surprising that the results of their study indicated that the dialogic reading program had substantial effects on preschool children's language development.

In a similar study, Lonigan and Whitehurst (1998) conducted an intervention study designed to increase the vocabulary skills of 3- and 4-year-old children. Teachers and parents were trained to read to the children using dialogic reading, and they were encouraged to ask the children questions during these reading sessions. The results of this study showed that the intervention program was the most effective when both parents and teachers were trained, thus indicating that parents and teachers must work together and support each other's efforts, highlighting the importance of home activities in conjunction with school activities in children's acquisition of reading skills.

Toomey (1993) reported that the children who read to their parents only at home did not make significant gains in their reading achievement. Rather, the children of the parents who had received training on specific strategies to use during these reading

sessions made the most gains. Toomey further noted that children's interest in reading and reading proficiency is greatly enhanced under the guidance of a parent who has participated in a reading training program.

In addition, Gilliam et al. (2004) reported the findings of a study that was conducted to determine the effects of a reading project that was planned to help the interested parents of Kindergarten children learn in-home activities that would promote literacy and school success for children. The design of this project, known as Project ROAR, or Reach Out and Read, was based on research findings that have indicated that the reading-related activities that parents engage in with their children at home can help children to acquire the early reading skills that enable them to become proficient readers (e.g., Wolfe & Nevills, 2004; Sénéchal, 2006; Sousa, 2005). The results of this study also indicated that parents are eager to support their children's learning and that when they are instructed in appropriate strategies and activities to use, they are able to support and enhance their children's learning.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a review of the literature focusing on the (a) definition of home-school partnerships and the issues related to establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships, (b) trends and barriers related to establishing home-school partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse parents, (c) overview of children's development of reading skills, (d) role of joint book reading in children's development of early reading skills, and (e) parents' role in children's development of early reading skills. Although the literature presented clear definitions of home-school partnerships and

the many ways that parental involvement can benefit children's development of early reading skills, the ways in which Kindergarten teachers can work with culturally and linguistically diverse parents to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships to support children's development of early reading skills remains elusive. This gap in the literature points to the need for understanding how Kindergarten teachers can work with parents in a collaborative partnership so that the parents have the tools and support they need to help their children develop, reinforce, and strengthen the early reading skills that are crucial in helping children benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1.

Based on the importance of early reading skills in children's development of reading proficiency, and the critical role that parents play in the development of these skills during the early years of education, it is important to understand how teachers can work with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to support children's development of these skills. In addition, this focus on culturally and linguistically diverse parents is essential because the schools in Ontario, Canada, are becoming increasingly more diverse. Therefore, this understanding of how Kindergarten teachers can connect with parents who may have different values and beliefs about education, who may not speak English as their first language, and who may not have the educational background they need to support their children's learning, can help other Kindergarten teachers create partnerships with the parents of the children they serve. The goal is to enable all our children, irrespective of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds, to have successful learning experiences at school.

Finally, the impetus for this study is the fact that the literature is much clearer about the outcome of constructive home-school partnerships than the implementation process and the theory that guides it. Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, it became apparent that the knowledge is stronger for the "what" than the "how," such that the literature elucidates what home-school partnerships are, how they benefit children's learning, and the potential barriers that impede the establishment of these partnerships. Therefore, the present study may extend the existing literature on home-school partnerships by generating a model for Kindergarten teachers to use to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with diverse parents. This was chosen as the focus of the study because research has shown that the literacy activities that parents engage in with their children at home can greatly enhance the development of children's early literacy skills (e.g., Bus et al., 1995; McCarthey, 2000; Scarborough et al., 1991). Epstein and Becker (1982) explained:

> Of all types of parent involvement, supervision of learning activities at home may be the most educationally significant. In contrast to PTA councils and classroom volunteers that involve relatively few parents, parent activities at home can involve many or all of the children's parents. We need to know whether and how teachers can successfully implement parent involvement activities to include all families. (p. 101)

The focus for this chapter was to present an overview of the issues related to home-school partnerships, children's development of reading skills, and the role of home-school partnerships in supporting and enhancing children's development of reading skills. The next chapter presents a discussion of the rationale and methods related to conducting this grounded theory study. The specific strategies used to recruit the

participants, collect and analyze the data, and protect the quality of the data are described in detail. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the specific details about how this study was conducted so that it may be replicated.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of the qualitative research paradigm, the specific research questions that guided this study, an introduction to the grounded theory approach, and the rationale for selecting this approach. Next, the role of the researcher, researcher qualities, research setting and participants, and selection of research participants are described. Methods to gain access to the population and ensure the ethical protection of the participants are then presented. This is followed by a description of the research design, the data collection strategies, the data analysis strategies, and the verification procedures. Finally, a description of the pilot study and its relation to this study are briefly presented.

Qualitative Research Paradigm

Qualitative research is based on the premise that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. It is a powerful tool for learning about how individuals interact within their social worlds (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002). This type of research is based on an interpretivist or constructivist, worldview in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and changing (Creswell, 1994). It is in sharp contrast to quantitative research methods, which draw from a positivist or a postpositivist claim that reality is organized by uniform, precise rules and laws that can be empirically observed, tested, measured, and quantified (Creswell, 1998). Although qualitative research has a long history in anthropology and sociology, it has become an accepted methodology in all the social sciences and applied fields of practice, including education. As Merriam

explained, “The growing legitimacy of doing qualitative research has been accompanied by a surge of books, journals, web sites, and international conferences devoted to this form of inquiry” (p. xv).

The qualitative research paradigm is comprised of several methods of inquiry, including biography, case study, ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory (Creswell, 1994). Although the procedures to collect and analyze data for each of these methods may be different, the fundamental ideas that guide each of these methods remain consistent. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), there are five features of qualitative research that relate to each of the methods of qualitative inquiry, but they clarified that each method may not exhibit all these features to an equal degree. These features include the following:

> 1. Naturalistic: This feature refers to the fact that qualitative research takes an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter and qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them. As Creswell (2003) explains, the researcher spends much time at the informants’ natural settings to understand their perceptions and meanings of reality.
>
> 2. Descriptive data: This feature refers to the fact that qualitative research is descriptive by nature. The data that are collected take the form of pictures and words rather than numbers and examples of data collected include, for example, interview transcripts, memos, photographs, observations, and field notes.
>
> 3. Concern with process: This feature exemplifies the fact that qualitative researchers are concerned with the process rather than just the outcome or product of their study and rather than simply accepting what the data may show on the surface, qualitative researchers are genuinely interested in understanding the fundamental meaning behind the data.
>
> 4. Inductive: This feature refers to the fact that qualitative researchers analyze their data from an inductive standpoint and their goal is to look for patterns, categories, and themes in the data which, ultimately, will help to generate a theory

> or explain the phenomenon being investigated in the research study. This is in contrast to a typical quantitative approach wherein the researcher is interested in using the data to substantiate a hypothesis or existing theory.
>
> 5. Meaning: This feature refers to the essence of qualitative research – the idea that researchers are interested in understanding how people make sense of their worlds and of their lived experiences. (Bogdan & Biklen, pp. 23-26)

Unlike standard quantitative research methods, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument in qualitative studies and collects this data by observing, interviewing informants, or collecting and analyzing relevant documents. Another important characteristic of qualitative studies is that the data are reported in a much more descriptive manner using pictures and words than is the case in quantitative studies, in which data are largely reported in numbers. Through the inductive process, the researcher analyzes and interprets the data and presents the final report using rich, thick descriptions.

A qualitative research approach was chosen for this study because of the "greater depth of understanding we can derive from qualitative procedures" (Berg, 1998, p. 2). The qualitative approach makes it possible to capture the essence of the topic being investigated by enabling the researcher to explore concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, and thick descriptions related to the phenomenon of interest (Berg). For this study, the researcher used this qualitative approach to engage in the research process as an active learner with the purpose of deeply understanding the participants' perceptions and experiences, and, eventually, presenting this information from the participants' viewpoints. This study was guided by the research questions presented next.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this grounded theory study:

1. How do successful Kindergarten teachers define home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?
2. According to these Kindergarten teachers, in what ways do home-school partnerships support children's development of early reading skills?
3. What are some strategies that these Kindergarten teachers use to communicate with parents on a regular basis?
4. In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers reach out to parents to establish and facilitate partnerships with them?
5. In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers use home-school partnerships to support children's development of basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness?

Using the data collected from this study, the researcher generated a model, presented in chapter 5, that Kindergarten teachers working with diverse parents can use to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships.

Grounded Theory Approach

Grounded theory methods emerged from the work of sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967), who first articulated these strategies and advocated that grounded theory researchers should develop their theories by grounding them in the data collected rather than by deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories. To ensure that the theories or explanations are in fact "grounded" in the data, it becomes important to oultine a

specific way to analyze the data. Glaser and Strauss stated, "Generating a theory from the data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematcially worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research" (p. 6). These specific ways for analyzing the data are presented in the data analysis section that follows.

The grounded theory approach is suited for social research that focuses on exploring new territory in terms of the subject being investigated and gaining insight into areas that have not been investigated extensively. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), grounded theory studies are "likely to offer insight, to enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action" (p. 12). Social researchers usually adopt this approach when, as in the case of the present study, there is limited literature available on the topic of interest (Denscombe, 2003).

Because the purpose of this study was to understand Kindergarten teachers' perceptions and experiences related to establishing and facilitating home-school parternships with parents from diverse backgrounds, and because there is limited literature available on this topic, the grounded theory approach was ideally suited for this study.

Given that this was an exploratory study, other qualitative research approaches were considered, including ethnography, phenomenology, and case study. However, ethnography was eliminated as a choice because this approach is largely used in studies that focus on describing the "culture of a group of people and learning what it is like to be a member of the group from the perspective of the members of that group" (Johnson &

Christenson, 2004, p. 47). The goal of ethnography is to understand the perceptions, values, and behaviours of individuals in a cultural group, and how they may be related or differ among members of this cultural group. Therefore, this apporach did not suit the purpose of this study.

Phenomenology also was considered as a potential approach for this study, but becausethe goal of phenomenology is to "understand how one or more individuals experience a specific phenomenon" (Johnson & Christenson, 2004, p. 47), and to describe "the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 51), this approach was rejected.

In addition, the case study approach was considered for this study. This approach focuses on exploring an issue through one or more cases within a bounded system (Creswell, 1998). Creswell defined a case study as an exploration of a case or multiple cases over time through detailed, in-depth data collection. According to Creswell, the bounded system is bounded by time and place, and the case being studied is often a program, an event, or a group of individuals. Although the present study focused on Kindergarten teachers, the purpose was not to study these teachers within the constraints of a given time and place, but to understand their perceptions and experiences with respect to the specific issue of home-school partnerships. Therefore, the case study approach was rejected.

Finally, because the researcher's goal was to create a model based on the information provided by the teachers, the grounded theory approach was ideally suited for this study. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) explained, the purpose of a grounded theory

study should be to build a substative model based on the data collected. The model should be "provisionally verfied through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23)

Role of the Researcher

Presently, I work as a Kindergarten teacher at a school with a large population of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In this role, I have had the opportunity to observe the many challenges that Kindergarten teachers face when working with diverse parents. I also have observed that there are many Kindergarten teachers across the school board who have successfully established and facilitated home-school partnerships with diverse parents. Therefore, I developed a genuine interest in exploring how these teachers have successfully established these home-school partnerships, and I intend to use this information to generate a model for all Kindergarten teachers to use to create these partnerships to support children's learning.

To ensure that I remained objective throughout the collection and analysis of the data, I controlled all my preconcieved notions and focused exclusively on what the data showed. To facilitate this process, I developed an audit trail to document reflections and to control potential bias. I also encouraged the participants to review their interview transcripts in detail to ensure that they accurately reflected their thoughts and opinions.

After having read the qualities of a successful grounded theorist described in the next section, I am confident that I was well suited to complete this study effectively. I was flexible and open to understanding the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, and I ensured that the analysis and the interpretation of the data were guided

by the specific processes outlined for grounded theory studies. In addition, I was committed to the work process so that the model that emerged from this study was grounded in the data.

Researcher Qualities

To conduct a grounded theory study, it is important for the researcher, referred to as the grounded theorist, to have specific qualities that will ensure successful completion of the study. Strauss and Corbin (1998) explained that some of the salient characteristics of a grounded theorist include the ability to critically analyze situations, recognize the tendency toward bias, think abstractly, be sensitive toward the respondents, and be devoted to the work process. Strauss and Corbin emphasized that perhaps the most important characteristic that every successful grounded theorist must have is tolerance for ambiguity. The grounded theorist must have the ability to accept that the discovery process used to interpret and analyze the data is ambiguous, and, unlike quantitative approaches that have prescribed standards and methods for data analysis and interpretation, this discovery process begins by accepting that there are different ways of making sense of the world. The ultimate goal of such a study is to discover these meanings from the perspectives of those who are being researched rather than from the perspective of the researcher. Strauss and Corbin recommended that to be able to sustain such ambiguity, grounded theorists must be flexible and open in their approach and in their thinking.

Research Setting and Participants

This study took place during the 2007-2008 academic year, and the participants included 12 Kindergarten teachers at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The researcher limited the number of participants to 12 because the goal of the study was to work closely with these teachers and to uncover in-depth information to answer the research questions that guided this study. In addition, the TDSB was chosen because it is the largest and among the most diverse school boards in Canada.

Selection of Research Participants

The process for selecting the sample for qualitative research is significantly different from that of quantitative research, where random sampling techniques are used and larger populations are studied. For quantitative research, this random sampling is an important aspect of the research process because the goal of quantitative studies is to generalize the findings to the target population. However, the purpose of qualitative studies is to engage deeply in the subject and to understand this subject from the viewpoints of the participants in the study. Therefore, purposive sampling is a better approach for a qualitative study because it enables the researcher to identify individuals that meet specific criteria and invite these specific individuals to participate in the study (Johnson & Christenson, 2004). In addition, this purposive sampling technique helps to ensure that the researcher will identify the best informants for the study, and it is based on the assumption that "the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 2001, p. 61).

For this study, purposive sampling was used to identify and select 12 teachers at the TDSB who met the following criteria:

1. The teacher was teaching a Kindergarten class in which at least 30% of the students are from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
2. The teacher has taught for at least 5 years. According to Podsen's (2002) model as it relates to teacher career stages, teachers who have taught for at least 5 years are at a point in their careers when they are "teacher specialists" who have developed the ability to "seek more in-depth understanding of students and their learning needs" (p. 25). Moreover, unlike novice teachers who, according to Podsen, are "focused on survival" (p. 23), teacher specialists have developed a solid understanding of their skills and abilities and, consequently, have much more confidence in their pedagogical approach.
3. Teachers had successfully established and facilitated home-school partnerships to support children's development of early reading skills.

To begin to identify and select the 12 teachers, the first step was to determine which of the elementary schools within the TDSB are among the most culturally and linguistically diverse. Although all the schools within the TDSB represent some degree of diversity, some schools are more diverse than others. Therefore, equity officers at the TDSB were contacted to access this information. Once these schools were identified, the principals at these schools were contacted, information about this study was shared with them, and they were asked to recommend Kindergarten teachers who have successfully

established and sustained home-school partnerships with parents to support children's development of early reading skills. Once the principal forwarded the names of any teachers to the researcher, the researcher formally contacted each teacher and provided the teachers with detailed information about the study. This was important to ensure that the teachers had the opportunity to reflect on the goals of the study and to decide if they were interested in participating. In addition, teachers often are in a better position to judge their practice than are principals and, after receiving the specific details about the study, they may decide that they do not have much to offer as informants.

Another strategy that was used to invite teachers to participate in this study was to post an e-mail in the TDSB's e-mail system that was created specifically for Kindergarten teachers across the school board. This e-mail outlined the specific purpose and goals of the study, and invited teachers to participate in the study. The purpose of inviting teachers through this e-mail was to reach out to as many Kindergarten teachers as possible and to find the best informants for this study.

Access to the Population

To invite Kindergarten teachers to participate in this study, the researcher had to receive approval from both the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University, and from the External Research Review Committee (ERRC) at the TDSB (see Appendix A). Because a pilot study was conducted prior to this study, the researcher had to complete a detailed research application package for both the IRB and the ERRC. Although the researcher had to submit another IRB application to conduct this study, the letter of cooperation from the chair of the ERRC at the TDSB stated that because only a

small number of teachers were going to be involved in the final dissertation study (i.e., up to 12 Kindergarten teachers), the researcher was granted permission to conduct both the pilot study and the final study. Therefore, the researcher did not need to submit another research application for the study. However, as per this letter of cooperation, the researcher was required to notify the chair of the research department if any aspect of the research, including the methodology and number of participants, changed.

Once approval was granted by the IRB (# 04-11-08-0331938), the researcher began to select teachers for this study using the criteria and strategies described previously. After the teachers were selected, every effort was made to meet each teacher in person before conducting the interview. The purpose of this initial meeting was to establish a working relationship with the teacher, to explain the goals of the study, to answer any question(s) the teacher(s) may have, and to provide them with the consent form for the study. If it was not be possible to meet a teacher in person before the day of the interview, the researcher connected with the teacher on the phone or via e-mail.

Ethical Protection of Participants

According to Merriam (2002), an important aspect of a successful qualitative study is one that has been conducted in an ethical manner. This is critical because the participants of any study are invaluable to the study because they willingly choose to be a part of the study and contribute to the generation of new knowledge. Therefore, all researchers must ensure that their studies will not jeopardize the participants' well-being in any way and that the studies are ethically sound. For the purposes of this study, the researcher received appropriate consent and approval from the participants by providing

them with detailed consent forms that outlined the goals and methods of the study, and giving them an opportunity to ask any questions they had before they decided to participate. These forms also emphasized that the participants would have the option to withdraw from the study at any point if they chose to do so. Copies of this consent form, a detailed description of the research study, how participants would be recruited, how consent would be obtained, and any identified risks or benefits associated with this study were submitted to the IRB at Walden University and to the research chair at the TDSB.

In addition to obtaining approval from the IRB and the ERRC, the researcher also needed to be respectful and sensitive toward the participants. In order to do so, the researcher took much time to personally explain the goals of the study to each participant, to explain that all information shared with the researcher would remain completely confidential, and to share how the data would be used and safeguarded. The participants were also told that only pseudonyms would be used in the final paper. Once the participants had read the consent form, understood the goals of the study, and received answers to any questions they had, they were asked to sign the consent form (see Appendix B). Data collection only commenced once the participants had understood their rights and had willingly signed the consent form. As a token of appreciation for the participation, the researcher presented each participant with a picture book for their classroom library.

Research Design

This grounded theory study explored Kindergarten teachers' perceptions and experiences related to establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships with parents

from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to support their children's development of early reading skills. This study focused on the development of three specific early reading skills: basic vocabulary, alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness. The study employed two primary strategies for data collection, and the specific plan that was used for collecting and analyzing the data follows.

Data Collection Strategies

Data for grounded theory studies are primarily collected through a combination of fieldwork methods, including interviews, observations, and document analysis (Creswell, 1998). Glaser and Strauss (1967) stressed the virtues of collecting the data from a variety of sources to see any variations in the data and to confirm conceptualizations. In addition, collecting data from a variety of sources also promotes the triangulation of data, which can substantially increase the credibility of research findings. Johnson and Christenson (2004) explained, "When you want to make a statement with confidence, you want your pieces of evidence to converge on the correct answer" (p. 424). This study utilized two strategies for data collection: (a) qualitative, intensive, in-depth, semistructured interviews with individual Kindergarten teachers, and (b) document analysis.

Interviews

To gain a broad and in-depth understanding of the Kindergarten teachers' perceptions and experiences, qualitative, intensive, in-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with each of the 12 participants. Qualitative interviewing was an appropriate data collection strategy for this study because the goal was to explore an issue within a social context and to develop an in-depth understanding of the problem being

investigated (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The questions for these interviews were open ended to allow the researcher to obtain rich material and to avoid imposing preconceived notions on participants (see Appendix C). Moreover, Charmaz (2006) explained that open-ended questions invite detailed discussion of the topic and encourage unanticipated stories and statements to emerge. In addition, Charmaz purported that intensive interviewing techniques are ideally suited for grounded theory methods because they are both "open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted" (p. 28).

Intensive, in-depth, semistructured interviews were chosen for this study because they enabled the researcher to

1. Explore statements or topics of interest.
2. Request more details, clarifications, and/or explanations.
3. Ask about the participant's thoughts, feelings, and actions.
4. Validate the participant's humanity, perspective, or action.
5. Use observational and social skills to further the discussion. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 26)

In addition to the researchers, intensive, in-depth, semi-structured interviews also enabled the participants to "express their views candidly, reflect on their experiences, express thoughts and feelings that may be inappropriate in other settings and relationships, and receive affirmation and understanding" (Charmaz, p. 27).

The researcher conducted an initial 1-hour interview with each participant; shorter follow-up interviews were conducted with some of the participants. Each of the interviews was recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim. To ensure that the researcher had not taken any of the information out of context or had

misinterpreted the information in any way, the transcripts were sent to the participants, who were then asked to review them for accuracy.

To initiate the process of interviewing, the researcher strived to establish rapport with the participants so that they were able to speak candidly about their perceptions and experiences. To further facilitate this process, the researcher emphasized the confidential nature of the interviews and explained to the participants that they would have an opportunity to look over the interview transcripts to ensure that they accurately reflected their thoughts.

Document Analysis

In addition to the interviews, the participants were asked to share any kind of communication they sent home with their students. This communication did not include any confidential information about any specific student and was restricted to the information that was sent home with every student. Examples included homework journals and weekly or monthly newsletters. The purpose of analyzing these types of documents was to understand how successful Kindergarten teachers communicate with parents who may have a limited understanding of the English language and learn about the kind of information they share with parents to help them work with their children at home on specific early reading skills.

Data Analysis Strategies

In grounded theory studies, there is a reciprocal relationship between data collection and analysis such that there are specific analysis techniques that need to be followed so that the resulting theory is completely grounded in the data (Strauss &

Corbin, 1990). In addition, unique to this approach is the notion that data analysis must begin as soon as the first piece of data is collected. This enables the researcher to begin looking for patterns and themes in the data, and to follow up on these in subsequent data collection initiatives such as interviews. Therefore, the researcher began the data analysis process after the first interview had been completed and transcribed, and this data analysis followed each subsequent interview in order to begin the process of identifying the emerging themes and categories.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), a fundamental feature of data analysis for grounded theory studies involves the constant comparision method. This method involves comparing and contrasting new codes, categories, and concepts as they emerge, and continually seeking to check them against existing versions (Denscombe, 2003). As Denscombe explained,

> By comparing each coded instance with others that have been similarly coded, by contrasting instances with those in different categories, even using hypothetical possibilities, the reseracher is able to refine and improve the explanatory power of the concepts and theories generated from the data. (p. 120)

For this study, constant comparison techniques were used to compare the data from one interview to subsequent interviews to determine how the data related to specific categories that emerged from the analysis. The constant comparison technique enabled the researcher to highlight the similarities and differences that existed in the data, identify categories, and reflect on the developing theory as it emerged. Therefore, the constant comparative method made it possible for the researcher to ensure that the theory that emerged was related directly to the data and was grounded in the data (Denscombe).

In addition, the data analysis for grounded theory studies is systematic; according to Strauss (1987), it is a rigorous process involving a "detailed grounding [of the data] by systematically and intensively analyzing data, often sentence by sentence, or phrase by phrase of the field note, interview, or other documents; by constrant comparison, data are extensively collected and coded" (p. 22). As Strauss explained, at the heart of grounded theory analysis is the coding process, which is the procedure by which data is broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways to build a theory that is grounded in the data (as cited in Strauss & Corbin, 1990). More specifically, coding consists of naming and categorizing data, and it involves an analytic process through which "data are fractured, conceptualized, and integrated to form theory" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 3).

The goal of coding is to recognize the categories emerging in the data and to develop and relate these categories to major concepts that all work toward building the final theory. Through this process of integrating the categories, a model will emerge around a few core categories that, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967), will reflect the main storyline of the study. Moreover, Glaser (1978) explained that coding is a key process involved in the constant comparative method, emphasizing that the code is of central importance in the generation of a theory. In the most general terms, coding can be defined as the process of naming or labeling things, categories, and properties.

For grounded theory studies, data analysis involves three specific coding techniques: open, axial, and selective. For the data analysis of this study, the researcher read and reread the data collected and used open, axial, and selective coding to identify

categories, concepts, and properties and their interrelationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Following is a brief description of each of these coding techniques.

Open Coding

Open coding is typically initiated at the beginning of the study, and the purpose of open coding is to break down the data into separate units of meaning, conceptualize and label data, and begin the process of categorizing individual phenomena that exist in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding represents the analysis concerned with identifying, naming, categorizing, and describing phenomena found in the data, and it typically represents the first attempt at condensing the mass of data into meaningful categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In this study, the researcher initiated open coding by closely examining the data (i.e., interview transcripts); breaking the data down into discrete parts; and, using the constant comparison technique, comparing the data sets for similarities and differences, focusing on emerging patterns and themes in the data to form categories. The goal of using this open coding strategy was to identify codes based on the patterns and themes in the data through systematic analysis and constant comparison of data sets. Once these codes had been identified, the researcher began to reduce the number of codes and to collect them together in a way that showed a relationship among them using axial coding.

Axial Coding

Axial coding follows open coding and involves making connections between the categories that emerged during open coding. This process involves sorting, synthesizing, and organizing large amounts of data, and reassembling them in new ways after open

coding (Creswell, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) clarified that the purpose of axial coding is "to relate categories and to continue developing them in terms of their properties and dimensions" (p. 230). Charmaz (2006) further clarified that "axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and resembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis" (p. 60).

Using axial coding, the researcher examined the data to answer specific questions related to the data, such as when, where, where, why, who, and how (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The overall purpose of this type of coding was to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships that existed between categories and subcategories that emerged during open coding.

Selective Coding

Selective coding was the final step in the data analysis process for this study and involved the integration of concepts around a core category, relating all other categories to this core category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The purpose of selective coding was to generate a model that was grounded in the data. The researcher achieved this by reflecting on the results of the analysis from open coding and axial coding. Johnson and Christenson (2004) explained that "it is during the selective coding that the researcher writes the story, explaining the grounded theory" (p. 384).

During this stage of analysis, the researcher achieved theoretical saturation because no more new information or concepts were emerging from the data, and the theory that emerged from the analysis was thoroughly validated by the data that had been

collected (Johnson & Christenson, 2004). For this study, the theory that emerged was represented by a model developed around a few core categories related to establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to support their children's development of early reading skills.

Memo Writing

An important strategy used by the researcher during data analysis was to write memos. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) explained, writing these memos is a critical step in grounded theory studies because it gives the researcher an opportunity to write down the thoughts, interpretations, and questions that may arise related to the data collection and analysis. In addition, these memos enable the researcher to reflect on directions for future data collection. Charmaz (2006) commented that "memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue" (p. 72). The researcher used memo writing as a strategy to guide the data analysis process, become actively engaged in the data, develop ideas, and guide further data collection efforts.

Verification

The ultimate goal of all qualitative researchers is to "produce valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner" (Merriam, 2002, p. 22). Although the terms validity and reliability are used extensively in quantitative studies, Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that the terms credibility, consistency, dependability, and applicability are considered indicators of quality for qualitative studies. Lincoln and Guba emphasized that "since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former [validity]

is sufficient to establish the latter [reliability]" (p. 316). This is evident in the fact that many of the strategies used to secure the validity and reliability of research findings overlap.

Validity

As with quantitative research, qualitative researchers can use specific strategies to establish validity and reliability. With respect to validity, internal validity is perhaps the most important aspect of qualitative studies and refers to the accuracy or trustworthiness of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For the purposes of this study, the researcher used triangulation and member checks to ensure that the data were accurate and trustworthy. According to Berg (1998), triangulation refers to the use of multiple data-gathering techniques to investigate the same phenomenon. In line with this definition, the researcher used both intensive, semistructured, in-depth interviews and document analysis to collect the data.

Another strategy that the researcher used to ensure internal validity was member checking, which involved taking the data (i.e., interview transcripts) and tentative interpretations of these data back to the participants from whom they were derived and asking if they are plausible (Merriam, 2002). Merriam emphasized that "while you [the researcher] may have used different words, participants should be able to recognize their experience in your interpretation or suggest some fine-tuning to better capture their perspectives" (p. 26).

In addition to the internal validity, the external validity or generalizability of the findings of a qualitative research study is an important aspect of the study and refers to

the fact that the findings should be transferred to individuals beyond the study. In order to ensure this type of generalizability in this qualitative study, the researcher provided detailed explanations about the methods used to collect and analyze data, and used rich, thick descriptions to present the findings of this study. Providing these thick, rich descriptions is an important strategy to guarantee this type of generalizability because it gives readers an opportunity to "determine how closely their situation match, and thus whether the findings can be transferred" (Merriam, 2002, p. 29).

Reliability

In addition to internal and external validity, the researcher strived to ensure that the findings of this study were reliable or, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained, credible, consistent, dependable, and applicable. For quantitative studies, reliability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study can be replicated (Johnson & Christenson, 2004). However, for qualitative studies, reliability refers to whether the results are consistent with the data collected. Merriam (2002) explained that "reliability lies in others' concurring that given the data collected, the results make sense – they are consistent and dependable" (p. 27). Merriam further asserted that the strategies that a qualitative researcher can use to obtain more reliable results include triangulation or the use of multiple data collection and analysis sources; investigator's position, or self-reflection; and an audit trail, which is described next. Therefore, the researcher used triangulation (i.e., the use of data from both interviews and document analysis to generate theory); self-reflections; and an audit trail.

For grounded theory studies specifically, reliability refers to how grounded the theory is in the data collected. Therefore, to ensure that the findings of this study were reliable and are, in fact, grounded in the data, the researcher used specific coding methods, as described in the previous section on data analysis, to ensure that the emerging theory fits the data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) explained that "another way to convey credibility of the theory is to use a codified procedure for analyzing data, which allows readers to understand how the analyst obtained the theory from the data" (Glaser & Strauss, p. 229).

Another strategy the researcher used to secure the reliability of the findings included creating an audit trail, which contains the dates of when each interview took place and describes how the data were collected, how categories emerged, and the decisions the researcher made throughout the inquiry (Merriam, 2002). Moreover, Merriam explained that an audit trail requires the researcher to keep a detailed journal that contains the researcher's questions, problems that may be encountered, reflections, and ideas during the data collection and analyses. Such an audit trail also helped the researcher of the current study reflect on her biases and limit the influence of these biases on the interpretation of the data.

Discrepant Data

Discrepant data refer to cases that disconfirm or challenge the emerging findings of the study. According to Merriam (2002), such cases can strengthen the internal validity of a qualitative study. Therefore, the researcher actively searched for, recorded, analyzed,

and reported negative cases of discrepant data in order to increase the credibility of the results reported in this study.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted over a 3-week period in the fall of 2007 with 2 Kindergarten teachers. The researcher met with the first teacher at her school after the students had left, and the researcher met with the second teacher at the researcher's home. Although a pilot study is only a small-scale project, it is useful in helping the researcher determine the feasibility of the study and to gather information about changes that may be needed to the larger study. For this particular study, perhaps the most important purpose of the pilot study was to test the interview questions to determine if these questions would elicit the responses that would enable the researcher to answer the research questions that guided this study. In addition, the pilot study was used to address the following points: (a) Ensure that the consent form was clear and easily understood by the teachers; (b) practice conducting an interview; and (c) practice transcribing interviews and analyzing the data using open, axial, and selective coding.

The results of this pilot study indicated that the interview questions were open ended and would enable teachers to reflect on their experiences and provide rich, in-depth responses that were a reflection of their perspectives and were rooted in their experiences. In addition, the researcher realized that the best way to elicit responses from these teachers was to have a conversation guided by the interview questions rather than use the characteristic question-and-answer format. The researcher discovered that "qualitative interviews are conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner

in an extended discussion. The researcher elicits depth and detail about the research topic by following up on answers given by the interviewee during the discussion" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4).

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the overall qualitative research paradigm, the specific research questions that guided this study, an introduction to the grounded theory approach, and the rationale for selecting this approach. Next, the role of the researcher, researcher qualities, research setting and participants, and selection of research participants were described. In addition, methods to gain access to the population and ethical protection of the participants were presented. This was followed by a description of the research design, the data collection strategies, the data analysis strategies, and the verification procedures. The chapter concluded with a description of the pilot study and its relation to the final study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study, focusing specifically on the major themes related to each research question that were gleaned from the data. Finally, chapter 5 presents an analysis and interpretation of the findings; a discussion of the implications of the findings; practical applications of study findings; recommendations for future research; and, most importantly, implications for social change.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter is organized into four sections and presents the process that was used to gather, generate, record, and analyze the data, in addition to the outcomes of the data analysis. The first section discusses the data collection process. This is followed by a discussion of the quality of the evidence for the data collected. The third section explains the methods used to analyze the data and a description of the systems used for data management and reflection. The final section presents the findings of this study in a manner that addresses each of the research questions.

Data Collection Process

This study employed a grounded theory approach. The purpose of the study was to explore Kindergarten teachers' perceptions and experiences related to establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to support children's development of basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness. The goal was to present Kindergarten teachers with a model that they can use to create and sustain home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to promote children's development of the aforementioned early reading skills. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do successful Kindergarten teachers define home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?

2. According to these teachers, in what ways do home-school partnerships support children's development of early reading skills?
3. What are some strategies that these teachers use to communicate with parents on a regular basis?
4. In what ways do these teachers reach out to parents to establish and facilitate partnerships with them?
5. In what ways do these teachers use home-school partnerships to support children's development of (a) basic vocabulary, (b) the alphabetic principle, and (c) phonological awareness?

In order to collect the data, 12 teachers from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) were invited to participate. The teachers were selected using purposive sampling techniques. According to the criteria established for the selection of participants, each teacher had been teaching for at least 5 years, each teacher was teaching a Kindergarten class in which at least 30% of the students were from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and each teacher had successfully established and facilitated home-school partnerships with parents. The teachers who were selected for this study work in classes where 60% to over 80% of the students are from diverse backgrounds. Perhaps 1 teacher explained it best when she was asked to share her feelings about working with culturally and linguistically diverse parents: "That's all we do at these schools. We're about as diverse as you can get." The researcher intentionally selected teachers from very diverse schools because she wanted to understand their best practices for establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships to support children's learning.

To connect with these teachers, equity officers at the TDSB were asked to share the names of schools within the TDSB with the greatest population of culturally and linguistically diverse students. The principals at these schools were contacted via e-mail and asked to forward the names of the Kindergarten teachers at their respective schools (see Appendix D). The researcher then contacted each of these teachers personally and provided them with detailed information about the study to ensure that they met the criteria for participation. In addition, the researcher also posted an e-mail in the TDSB's e-mail system that is created specifically for Kindergarten teachers across the school board (see Appendix E). This e-mail outlined the specific purpose and goals of the study, and was an open invitation for interested teachers to participate in this study. The purpose of inviting teachers through contacting principals directly and through posting this e-mail was to reach out to as many Kindergarten teachers as possible and, ultimately, to find the best informants for this study. Data for this study were rendered through in-depth, one-on-one, semistructured interviews with each of teachers and through document analysis.

Interviews

The intention of conducting these interviews was to gain a broad and in-depth understanding of the Kindergarten teachers' perceptions and experiences. In order to do so, qualitative intensive, in-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with each of the 12 participants. Each of these interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was guided by a specific interview protocol. In addition, as a result of the rich, detailed responses obtained from each of the participants, the researcher only needed to conduct follow-up interviews with 7 of the teachers to get additional information on some of the

responses they had provided. These follow-up interviews lasted between 25 to 45 minutes, and 5 of these interviews took place at the schools where these teachers work, and two took place at their homes.

To conduct the initial interview, a time and a place that was mutually convenient for both the researcher and participant were agreed upon, and all interviews were conducted in a place with adequate lighting and hearing distance. Of the 12 interviews, 10 were conducted after school during the week, and 2 were conducted during the weekend at each of the teacher's homes. The researcher made every effort to meet each participant in person before the day of the interview. If it was not possible to meet in person, the researcher connected with the participants on the phone or via e-mail. The purpose of this initial meeting was to answer any questions that the participants may have had as well as to establish rapport with them so that they would be able to speak candidly about their perceptions and experiences. To further facilitate this process, the researcher emphasized the confidential nature of the interviews and explained to the participants that they would have an opportunity to look over the interview transcript to ensure that the transcript was an accurate reflection of their thoughts.

Each of the interviews was recorded using a high-quality digital voice recorder and was transcribed verbatim. The questions used during the interviews were open ended to give the participants an opportunity to respond based on their own thoughts rather than being led by the researcher. It was important to use these open-ended questions because, as Charmaz (2006) explained, open-ended questions invite detailed discussion of the topic and encourage unanticipated stories and statements to emerge. In addition,

questions to probe the participants were used throughout the interviews when clarification was needed or when the researcher wanted the participants to elaborate on their responses. The researcher was careful to use questions that did not lead the participants toward a given response, but which simply helped them to focus their thoughts. Some examples of probing questions include the following:

1. "Can you please clarify what you mean?"
2. "How did that make you feel?"
3. "Can you please give me an example?"

The use of these questions is supported by Hatch (2002), who explained that "interviewers enter interview settings with questions in mind but generate questions during the interview in response to informants' responses" (p. 23).

Document Analysis

In addition to the interviews, data also were collected using document analysis. Each participant was asked to provide the researcher with a copy of any kind of communication they sent home with their students. This communication did not include any confidential information about any specific student and was restricted to the information that was sent home with every student. Examples of documents that were analyzed included homework folders, weekly or monthly newsletters, and other letters that were sent home. The purpose of analyzing these types of documents was to understand how successful Kindergarten teachers communicate with parents who may have a limited understanding of the English language and learn about the kind of information they share with parents to help them work with their children at home on

specific early reading skills. In addition, the researcher was interested in analyzing and comparing the similarities and differences in the content of the documents that were sent home by each of the 12 teachers.

Evidence of Quality

The goal of qualitative research is to provide an in-depth understanding of people's experiences and perspectives in the context of their personal settings or circumstances (Merriam, 2002). This type of research is most often characterized by a concern or a need to explore phenomena from the perspectives of the participants of the study. However, to be able to make a contribution to the existing body of knowledge, qualitative researchers need to make certain that the findings of their studies are credible, trustworthy, and reliable.

Strategies Used to Collect Evidence of Quality

For the purposes of this study, the researcher used member checks and triangulation to assure the accuracy of the data and to preserve the quality of the data. With respect to member checks, the researcher transcribed each interview verbatim and sent the transcripts to each of the participants, who were then encouraged to read them over to check that they were an accurate reflection of their thoughts and perspectives. The researcher also shared her interpretations of some responses collected from 5 participants with them because their responses to specific interview questions were not clear. Although the researcher made every attempt to address any questions she had related to the participants' responses during the day of the interview, the researcher noticed some

ambiguities during the transcription process and wanted to clarity these ambiguities with the participants to ensure that she did not misinterpret their responses in any way. In order to do so, the researcher went to the participants' respective schools, presented them with a copy of their transcript, and shared her interpretation of these responses with them. According to Merriam (2002), this is an important step because "while you [the researcher] may have used different words, participants should be able to recognize their experience in your interpretation or suggest some fine-tuning to better capture their perspectives" (p. 26).

In addition, the researcher also used triangulation to assure the accuracy of the data. According to Berg (1998), triangulation refers to the use of multiple data-gathering techniques to investigate the same phenomenon. In line with this definition, the researcher used both intensive, semistructured, in-depth interviews and document analysis to collect the data.

Moreover, because this was a grounded theory study, the reliability of the findings depended greatly on how "grounded" the theory was in the data collected. Therefore, the researcher used specific coding and data analysis methods to assure that the emerging theory fit the data and was, in fact, grounded in the data. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) explained, "Another way to convey credibility of the theory is to use a codified procedure for analyzing data, which allows readers to understand how the analyst obtained the theory from the data" (p. 229). The researcher created a list of codes to use to facilitate the coding procedure (see Appendix F).

Researcher Bias

Qualitative research is liable to be influenced by the bias and subjectivity of the researcher. However, for the grounded theory approach, Glaser (1978) maintained that there are safeguards in place to reduce this bias, such as following a very specific data analysis protocol, using the constant comparison method, and memo writing. Glaser also emphasized the need to link the data collection and data analysis at every step of the research process so that they are closely related to the emerging findings.

Another important strategy to ensure the trustworthiness and quality of the findings of this study was bracketing. It was important for the researcher to become aware of positive and negative feelings toward the participants that might have compromised the neutrality of her analysis. Hatch (2002) explained that researchers are better able to become aware of their own feelings by noting them down in memos. Therefore, the researcher kept a journal documenting any questions or problems that were encountered, reflections and feelings about the participants, and ideas that emerged during the data collection and analysis stages of this study. This journal helped the researcher reflect on her biases and limit the influence of these biases on the interpretation of the data. In addition, the researcher kept a detailed audit trail documenting each of the steps followed during the data collection and analysis stage of this study, as well as information pertaining to the dates and locations of interviews with the teachers (see Appendix G).

In addition, Strauss and Corbin (1998) asserted that the development of theoretical sensitivity is important in qualitative research, defining theoretical sensitivity

as the "ability to respond to the subtle nuances of, and cues to, meanings of data" (p. 39), and that it is important in discovering data that might otherwise have been overlooked. However, according to Glaser (1978), theoretical sensitivity depends on the researcher's knowledge and experience with the phenomenon under study. For the purposes of this study, the researcher's knowledge and experience were limited with regard to establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Although the researcher works as a Kindergarten teacher, she had not previously conducted interviews with Kindergarten teachers who work with diverse parents. Therefore, the researcher's experience as a Kindergarten teacher, but lack of experience with respect to the topic being investigated, provided her with some familiarity with the topic but sufficient distance from it to be able to analyze the participants' thoughts and experiences from a new perspective.

Data Analysis and Emerging Understandings

In qualitative studies, the successful analysis of the data requires a systematic approach to ensure that the themes that emerge from the analysis are an accurate reflection of the data collected. This is particularly relevant for grounded theory studies, wherein the researcher uses very specific coding procedures prescribed by this approach (i.e., open, axial, and selective coding) to ensure that the findings are grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For the purposes of this study, the researcher used the coding process and the constant comparison method to analyze the data. In addition, the reseracher used memo writing to document her ideas about emerging themes.

In grounded theory studies, there is a reciprocal relationship between data collection and analysis such that data analysis must begin as soon as the first piece of data is collected so that the researcher can begin looking for themes in the data and follow up on these themes in subsequent data collection initiatives (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Therefore, the researcher began the data analysis process after the first interview had been completed and transcribed, and this data analysis followed each subsequent interview to begin the process of identifying the emerging and recurring themes.

Constant Comparison Method

A fundamental feature of data analysis for grounded theory studies involves the constant comparision method. This method is focused on comparing and contrasting new codes, categories, and concepts as they emerge, and continually seeking to check them against existing versions (Denscombe, 2003). For this study, constant comparison techniques were used to compare the data from one interview to subsequent interviews to determine how the data related to specific categories that emerged from the analysis. The constant comparison technique enabled the researcher to highlight the similarities and differences that existed in the data, identify categories, and reflect on the developing theory as it emerged. Therefore, the constant comparative method made it possible for the researcher to ensure that the theory that emerged was related directly to the data and was grounded in the data (Denscombe).

Coding Process

The coding process was initiated as soon as the first interview was transcribed and, following the analysis of the first transcript, an initial list of codes was generated. A

definition was attributed to each code, and this list of codes was then used to analyze all subsequent interview transcripts and documents collected from the 12 teachers. In addition, this coding process was conducted by reading each of the interview transcripts and documents collected thoroughly and atributing a code to words, sentences, paragraphs, or sections in the transcripts. For example, the code "teacher communication strategies" was attributed to data that related specifically to the strategies that the teachers used to communicate with parents. Also, if any new codes emerged from the transcripts that were not on the initial list of codes, the researcher added this code to the list and analyzed all the transcripts and documents again to see if there was a section that fit this new code (see Appendix H).

To facilitate the coding process, a hard copy of each interview transcript was printed and photocopied onto large pieces of paper, and the codes associated with the data in these transcripts were written on the margins of these papers. After the hard copy of each transcript was coded, the coded sections from all 12 transcripts were electronically cut and pasted into a new computer file with the title code. To keep track of these coded sections, the name of the participant was written next to each section. This was important so that the coded section could be traced back to the original transcript to provide further contextual details that may have become necessary as the data analysis proceeded.

Once all the interviews were coded, repeated coding was performed to review interpretations until no new insights were gleaned and no new codes emerged. Coded sections with the same code were compared to each other to ensure consistency of

application of the code as well as adherance to the definition of the code. In addition, as the researcher read through the transcripts, she made notes on memos about emerging and recurring themes.

Upon completion of the coding process, the codes that had common elements were merged to form categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Electronic files were created for each category containing the codes and the coded sections of the transcripts that had been merged to form the category. The categorized data were then printed and stored in files with the name of each category. The hard copies of the categorized data were then used to search for emerging and recurring themes.

Finally, the codes that were used to analyze the data were generated from the data and were not predetermined from the literature. The researcher chose not to use any codes from the literature because the data analysis for a qualitative study needs to be an inductive process whereby the goal is to understand the perceptions and experiences of the participants rather than to prove an existing theory or hypothesis. As Strauss and Corbin (1990) explained, although literature based codes can provide a useful tool, they have the potential to impede the development of new ideas.

Memo Writing

Memo writing is another tool that was used during the data analysis process. As Glaser (1978) explained, memo writing is an essential part of data analysis in a grounded theory study and it is defined as the "theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding" (p. 83). By engaging in memo writing during the data analysis process, the researcher was able to develop

conceptual ideas about the data and to identify emerging themes. Glaser further explained that memos serve to "connect the data and the final analysis explicitly by conceptually raising the analytic formulation of the codes" (p. 84). Therefore, memo writing allowed the researcher the freedom to develop ideas and themes as they arose during the analysis process, as well as to ensure that the emerging themes were grounded in the data.

According to Glaser (1978), memos should be written on separate notes from the data. Therefore, the researcher used index cards to make notes during the data analysis process. Memo writing started after the first interview was conducted and continued until the completion of the study.

Research Findings

The following section presents the findings of this study. The findings are presented in a manner that addresses each of the research questions that guided this study. Themes gleaned from reviews of the transcripts and analyses of the documents are presented, and examples of any discrepant responses are noted throughout the findings. Excerpts of selected participants' verbatim responses are interwoven throughout the findings to provide evidence for the themes, and these responses are all based on the participants' specific perceptions and experiences related to working with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to create and sustain home-school partnerships with them to support children's development of early reading skills.

Research Question 1

How do successful Kindergarten teachers define home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?

According to the teachers in this study, the definition of home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds includes collaboration and communication with parents, and the idea that teachers and parents play very specific roles in these partnerships.

During the in-depth interviews, the participants were asked a series of questions to explore their perceptions about home-school partnerships and how they define these partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The teachers' responses were clustered around three main themes (see Figure 1).

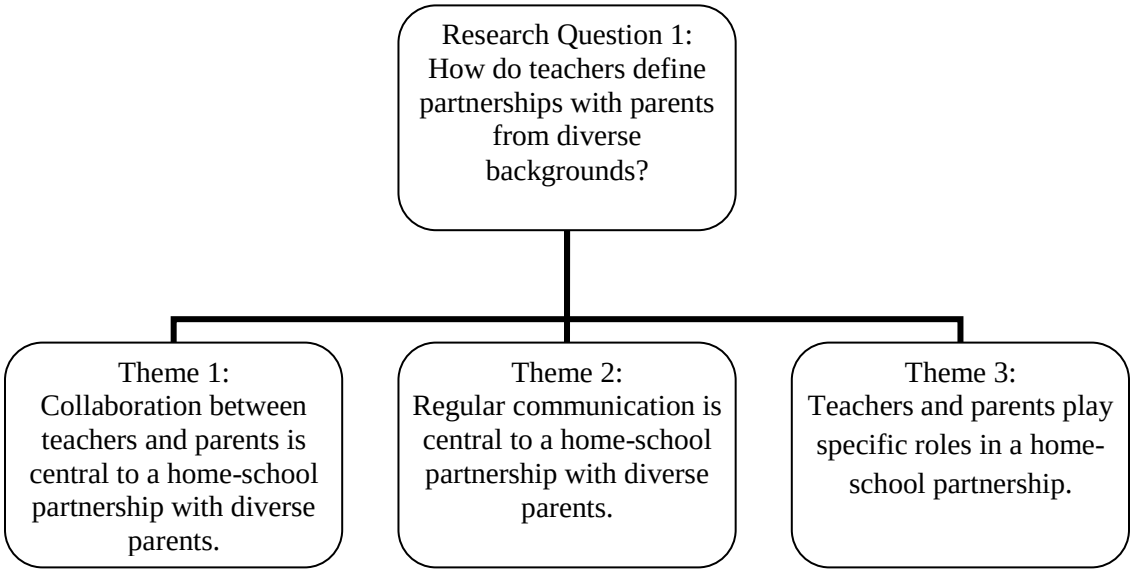

Figure 1. Diagram of themes for research question 1.

Theme 1. Collaboration between teachers and parents is central to a home-school partnership with diverse parents.

The teachers explained that working in collaboration with parents is crucial to children's academic success, emphasizing that this collaboration is particularly important in facilitating home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In the words of these teachers:

> When families immigrate to Canada from other countries, they are often unsure about the education system here and about teachers' expectations. And because of their limited ability to communicate in English, they may hesitate to approach me and to become involved in their children's learning. But what I have found is that when I take the initiative and give them opportunities to work together with me, they are able to see that I am there to support them and, with time, they also realize that they need to support me. I also learn more about what their needs are and how I should be supporting them. But when language is an issue, I have experienced that teachers have to work much harder to connect with parents and to work with the parents. We have to get interpreters to help us, we have to ask members on our staff to help us, and we may even have to ask parents of other children who live close to these parents to help us. I mean it is not easy and it can be frustrating at times, but we do what we have to do to make this type of collaboration possible. We have to work together for the children's sake. It's the only way the children will succeed and it's the only way we can understand what the parents need so that we can help them work with their children at home.
>
> I find that it does not matter where they [parents] are from or what their cultural or linguistic backgrounds, we are getting the same sort of support and response from them. Parents just need us to help them understand that they are important and once they know that teachers will support them, they are on board right away. Teachers really do have to take the first step.

As these teachers explained, when parents come to Canada from other countries, they may have no understanding of our education system, and they may be intimidated to approach teachers with their questions or concerns. They also noted that if teachers take the initiative to reach out to these parents, the parents will begin to realize that teachers are there to support them, and teachers will also benefit because they will understand the kind of support that parents need to work with their children at home. For example, the teachers explained that in working closely with parents, they are able to learn about

parents' work schedules, the languages they speak at home, and the kinds of activities they do with their children at home. Although teachers may have to find ways to overcome several challenges to reach out to and connect with these parents, the teachers agreed that their efforts are critical because partnerships with diverse parents can only be established once teachers and parents are able to work together. As 1 teacher explained,

> You cannot dream of having a partnership with them [diverse parents] if you can't even work together. Partnerships involve so much more but working together is the base and it really helps parents see the need for these partnerships. I mean when they see how much we can accomplish together, they see for themselves why these partnerships are so important and why they need to become involved in their children's learning. And I mean they may never have worked with teachers before so it's important to start off this way. And I really feel that once teachers and parents are working together, the possibilities are endless. You can do so much more together to help the children. And it doesn't matter if the parents speak English or not. I think the key really is to reach out to them and to get them working with you. Once you manage that, you can work on strengthening and maintaining the partnership. And there is so much support available to overcome the language issues.

However, although the teachers strongly agreed that collaboration is an important piece that must be in place to facilitate home-school partnerships with parents, they explained that there are many challenges to initiating collaborative relationships with parents from diverse backgrounds. According to 1 teacher,

> I think they [diverse parents] understand that it's important to work with the teacher to help their children learn, but I think that they were raised so differently and maybe their parents had no connection to their schools and took no part in their learning. So sometimes I find that it really takes time to connect to these parents. I know they mean well, I know they want their children to succeed, and I know they want to work with us but they just have to get over their own experiences and start fresh. I can only imagine how hard it is for them. And so I think it's very important to be patient. Just be patient and give them time. Keep going at it and keep helping them understand why we need them to work with us. It will happen.

In addition, the teachers shared that it is not possible for children to learn all that they possibly can without their parents' involvement in this learning:

> In a home-school partnership, parents are an extension of you, the teacher, outside of the classroom. When parents and teachers work together, parents have the support they need to pick up just where the teacher left off and this greatly benefits the children…And the reality is that I just can't do it on my own. I have a class of over twenty children who all have their own learning needs and who are all at different points in their development and learning. I can't possibly address all these needs on my own. I need the parents' help.

Similarly, the following teacher explained that whether she works with culturally and linguistically diverse parents or whether she works with mainstream Canadian families, her definition of home-school partnerships remains the same, emphasizing that

> It doesn't matter who the parents are, where they come from, or what language they speak. I just need them to work with me. Whether they speak English or not is irrelevant. To support children's literacy development, they absolutely must work with their children at home and there is so much they can do. I mean they can read to their children, they can have conversations with their children and all this can be in their native language. It is my job to help them understand what to do and I have found that when I am able to find ways to communicate with them, whether it's through an official interpreter from our school board or through translated notes I send home, they realize that I am genuinely interested in working with them and supporting them, and I slowly start to see them become more and more involved in their children's learning. It's a good feeling. And once their child has completed JK [Junior Kindergarten] with me, they are much more relaxed and work with me much more during their child's year in SK [Senior Kindergarten].

As these teachers explained, they strongly believe that all parents, irrespective of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, must work with their children at home to scaffold their learning and to help them consolidate the skills that they are learning at school. The teachers shared that this opportunity for children to consolidate the skills at home is critical to their learning because teachers do not have the time during the school day to

ensure that the children have internalized these skills or concepts, especially if the children are struggling with them:

> I mean they [the children] are only with me for two-and-a-half hours in a day, and when the weather is bad, a whole chunk of that time is spent getting them dressed and undressed in winter clothing. So I really believe that we have to work together as partners to make sure children are getting support at home.

In working with parents from diverse backgrounds, the teachers emphasized that once these parents are willing to work with them, it becomes very important for teachers to continue to find ways to ensure that there are supports in place to maintain these collaborative relationships. One teacher explained:

> When parents agree to work with us to support their children's learning, the onus is on us to make sure they continue to work with us. So we really have to find ways to overcome challenges like, for example, language. For instance, I remember having a child from El Salvador my fourth or fifth year of teaching. His mother, who happened to be a single mom, only spoke Spanish but could understand some English. Right from our *Welcome to Kindergarten* orientation meeting in June, she connected with me and I could see just how interested she was and how much she wanted to be involved in her son's learning. In her broken English, she asked me how she could help her son get ready for school in September. I could see how concerned she was. Then again on the first day of school, there she was. She had taken a day off from her job to be there to see her son off. When she came to pick him up, she wanted to speak to me. Fortunately, we had an educational assistant on our staff who spoke Spanish so I knew I could count on her to help me. Ever since that day, the mother continued to show up to all meetings and would also come by to see me about once a month. I wanted to encourage her to continue to meet with me so I set up specific dates and times to meet with her so that I could ask the educational assistant to be there to translate. Sometimes I had to give up my lunch hour or come in much earlier or stay later than I normally would. And if it ever happened that the assistant was unavailable, I would make sure an interpreter was present or I would ask the mother to bring someone she knew. So there are so many ways to make it work. There really are. But we need to have commitment from the teachers and we need to have commitment from the parents.

Although the teachers repeatedly emphasized that collaboration is a critical component of successful home-school partnerships with diverse parents, they also emphasized that this collaboration is only possible if they recognize and respect the parents' views, and acknowledge and accept the differences that may exist in the ways that parents think about education:

> It's really about listening and respecting the parents and where they are coming from even if it doesn't fit what you believe. It's all about finding the middle ground where both the teacher and parent can be comfortable. Once this middle ground has been established, it becomes possible to set realistic and achievable goals for the child. You cannot possibly work with them without listening to them and understanding their concerns and perspectives.

As this teacher noted, other teachers also agreed that it is very important for them to really listen to these parents and understand how to reach a common ground so that it then becomes possible for them to work together. These teachers explained that it is not always easy to reach this common ground because they may not share the same vision for their children and they may not understand the goals that teachers have set for their children. Therefore, in order to sustain this collaboration, the teachers conceded that they must have an open mind; they must listen to and acknowledge parents' thoughts, opinions, and concerns; and they must always emphasize to the parents that they are valued in the partnership. According to the teachers, this builds an atmosphere of trust and respect, which is requisite to establishing the relationship most conducive to effective collaboration:

> I always tell new teachers starting out at our school to listen to the parents carefully. They may not be as educated as you [teachers] are or they may speak broken English, but it is so important to be mindful of the fact that there is at least as much opportunity for you to learn something useful and helpful from them as

> there is for them to learn from you. I can't emphasize enough that teachers must respect these parents' thoughts and really listen to them. And think of it this way. If you were going to their country for a better future for your child, wouldn't you expect to be heard and wouldn't you expect to be respected? Get interpreters or someone on staff to help you if you need that. But listen to them, respect what they have to say, and let them know that their input is valuable.

Similarly, the teachers explained that listening to diverse parents very carefully is critical because they may not have had positive experiences with education; therefore, the teachers need to work with them to help them see that they are partners in their children's learning and that, like the parents, teachers also want the best for the children:

> Most parents bring with them their lived experience of school and what we have to honor as educators is that these experiences may not have been positive. And with those people who have been wounded at school, those parents who have had hurtful experiences at school, we have to be cognizant of that. For example, when I was talking to a mother of a child who had special needs, the mother disclosed to me that she also went through a special education program and how that impacted her willingness to work with the school. And I have found that as the teacher, you are the person that the parents rely on the most to get their children the services they may need and to work with them to really stand up for the child. And as an educator, you really have to be aware of how powerful a position that is. We have to work with them to show them that we want the best for their children. We have to build that trust.

This teacher further explained that some of the parents he has worked with have been educated in systems where parents are considered a "hindrance" if they approach the teacher with their questions or concerns, and where teachers prefer to be "left alone to teach." Therefore, as this teacher emphasized, it is important for teachers always to be cognizant of the fact that parents, as well intentioned as they may be, may have to overcome the negative influences of their own experiences before they can begin to work collaboratively with teachers.

Furthermore, the teachers explained that although collaboration supports children's learning, this type of collaboration also presents diverse parents with a great opportunity to truly experience the role they play in their children's learning, especially if they have been raised in a system where parents have very little involvement in their children's learning. The teachers shared that parents who are new immigrants to the country have little knowledge of the Canadian system of education, they struggle with how to work with their children at home, and many do not realize the tremendous influence they have on their children's learning and development. However, in working with teachers collaboratively, the teachers shared that parents begin to observe the impact of their involvement, and they begin to appreciate how important they are to their children's learning. Once they come to this realization, they are much more willing to work with the teachers in partnership. In the words of 1 teacher who spent over 20 years teaching Kindergarten in a school with students from many diverse backgrounds,

> For me, the best part about a partnership is that I get to work collaboratively with parents and that I get to support them in any way I can. I love the excitement I feel when they learn a new idea or a new strategy from me and then they take it and use it with their child at home. And you know the parents that do that because the child comes in and they've got the concept or skill. And so I love to share this excitement the parents feel when they understand how to help their child and they see their child's progress. That really is a good feeling. Just seeing the parents realize that they play a big part in their children's learning. So when they look excited about working with their child at home because they feel empowered, that is the best feeling for me.

Collaboration between parents and teachers has been shown to enhance children's motivation to learn as well as the development of key emergent skills that are necessary for academic success in all areas (Christenson, 2002; Epstein, 1995). This assertion is

supported by the teachers, who shared that this type of collaboration is central to a home-school partnership because it enables teachers and parents to work together to ensure that children receive the support they need to consolidate the skills they are learning at school. More notably, teachers shared that they truly enjoy working in collaboration with diverse parents because they are both very happy with the outcomes of such collaboration:

> I love working with parents because they see the growth their child is making and they are so excited and you're excited, but the best part is that you're both excited about the same thing. I love that. And you know the kids that come in who had no idea how to read but are now reading so well. It's just so exciting to see them and the parents love it. And the parents know that we've both been a part of this growth and that the work they've done at home is just as important as what I've done at school.

Summary of Theme 1, Research Question 1:

- Successful teachers collaborate with diverse parents to learn about the support parents need to work with their children at home.
- Successful teachers collaborate with parents new to the country to help them learn about the system of education in Canada.
- Successful teachers collaborate with parents to help them realize the critical role they play in their children's learning.
- Successful teachers value and respect parents in order to collaborate with them effectively.
- Successful teachers use strategies to sustain collaborative relationships with all parents (e.g., arrange for interpreters).

Theme 2. Regular communication is central to a home-school partnership with diverse parents.

The teachers emphasized that in addition to collaboration, home-school partnerships with parents from diverse backgrounds can only be sustained if there is frequent communication with parents. The teachers shared that irrespective of the barriers that may prevent or impede communication with these parents, it is absolutely essential to

overcome these barriers and to have open, ongoing communication with them. One teacher commented:

> I think communication with them [diverse parents] is absolutely critical and I think this is especially relevant in Kindergarten and with parents who have recently moved to our country, because Kindergarten is that bridge from the home or daycare experience to school. In teaching, we often use the phrase "in loco parentis" or "in place of parents" and it is nowhere more so than in Kindergarten where you have to reassure the parents that not only are you able to infuse the academics, but that you have that sensibility of the whole child and that you are able to provide for all their needs. And communication is that medium or really the channel through which we can let parents know that we will take care of their child. And what is also really critical is that we connect regularly and consistently communicate with the parents of those children who are brought in by babysitters or by daycare staff since we don't see them nearly as often as the parents who always bring their children to school.

As this teacher explained, regular communication with all parents, whether or not they speak English, is critical because it is the only way to reassure them that school is a safe place for their children – a place where the children will be valued, respected, and happy. In addition, all the teachers agreed that this is especially relevant for culturally and linguistically diverse parents who may be new to the country and who may be struggling with issues related to assimilation and to adapting to a new home, a new culture, a new language, and a whole new system of education. Although all parents are anxious when their children transition to Kindergarten and begin school for the very first time, Broussard (2003) noted that this anxiety is particularly severe for parents who are new to the country and who struggle with the English language. However, the teachers shared that regular communication with these diverse parents helps to alleviate their anxiety, it helps them to realize that teachers truly want the best for their children, and it enables teachers to sustain partnerships with these diverse parents:

> I think communication is so very important with our diverse parents because that is what establishes the link between the home and the school. It is important because a lot of our parents are not familiar with the education system here in Canada and so I feel communication is the key to help them understand our system here. Once they begin to see how we teach and what our goals are, I have seen that they begin to get comfortable with us and they begin to take the initiative to get involved and to support us by working at home with their children.

In addition, the teachers also explained that communicating with diverse parents regularly makes it possible for teachers to understand the parents' situations and, as a result, become aware of how to support them:

> I think it's important to communicate things to parents whether it's on a daily basis or as often as possible. I even tell the parents why their child got a bandage. And I also talk to them about any behavior issues that may have come up. I think it's really important for the child to know that there is a real shared connection between the parents and the teacher and I think it's important for the parent's comfort level especially if the child is their only or first child at school. And it helps me because I learn from them about where I need to go as a teacher with their children but also with them as well. I really learn about how to support parents' efforts at home by learning about their circumstances.

As this teacher shared, regular communication enables teachers to learn more about these diverse parents' needs and their circumstances so that they are able to understand how to accommodate the parents and how to get them involved in home-school partnerships. Furthermore, this teacher also highlighted that regular communication between the home and school helps children realize the important connection between these two very important systems in their lives. When children observe their teachers and parents communicating and working together, they see the connection between their home life and their school life and this enriches their learning experiences.

Although the teachers conceded that communicating with all parents on a regular basis is critical to sustaining home-school partnerships, they emphasized that when working with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the language barrier is a huge impediment to any type of communication. According to this teacher,

> There is so much I want to tell the parents and so much I want to share with them, but it is hard because many of them really struggle with the English. I mean I am able to get basic information to them, but I really cannot get into detail so when I want to sit down with them to explain, for example, that that their child needs to practice their letter sounds, I can tell them this but I have no way of knowing if they have understood me. It is really hard. So what I do is that I know the parent has enough English to understand what I am saying, I don't worry about it. But if I know that the parent really struggles with it and if what I have to say is important, I will make sure I get another parent, an older student, or someone on staff to help me get my message across. It is a lot of work on my part, but it has to be done. The parents are willing to learn how to support their children and, in this partnership, I need to give them that support. That's what working together is all about. And it really helps to know the parents. In working with them, I get to know how much English they understand and whether or not I need to get a translator to help with the communication.

As this teacher explained, if parents are unable to speak or understand much English, it becomes very challenging for the teachers to communicate with the parents as frequently as they would like. Nevertheless, she asserted that there are supports in place and teachers should, for example, request that interpreters come in to facilitate communication sessions between the parents and teachers. However, even though the teachers agreed that interpreters are a great resource, they emphasized that it is essential to get to know the parents and to develop a sense of their proficiency in English in order to determine if there is, in fact, a need to request for an interpreter:

> Until you've worked closely with a parent, you have no idea how skilled they are in English. I mean just because they don't speak to you doesn't meant that they are not able to. They may be shy or they may just feel out of place or maybe you

> just haven't connected with them enough. It really takes them time to open up to you especially if you are not working hard at making that connection. So it is important to get to know the parents. The last thing you want to do is invite them to a meeting with an interpreter present and then realize that they are fully capable of speaking to you in English.

Moreover, the teachers explained that if the parents have rudimentary knowledge of English, it becomes important to use simple language that they can understand but avoid being condescending. They recommended that teachers should avoid using educational jargon and other technical terms that may prevent parents from understanding what is being communicated to them.

In addition, the teachers explained that having individuals on staff who are able to help with these translations is beneficial. According to one teacher,

> Having teachers or other staff members at the school who are able to speak some of the dominant languages spoken by the parents of our students is a great resource to have. I love being able to just pull the teacher who teaches down the hall from me and ask her to help me get my message across to my Vietnamese parents. I absolutely love that.

In addition to issues around language, the teachers explained that it is important to develop an understanding of the parents' cultural norms and practices in order to build relationships and to improve the quality of communication with them. The following teacher emphasized that these norms and values can influence the way parents interpret messages they receive from the teachers:

> When it comes to communicating with diverse parents, cultural competence is a huge challenge and for me as a multigenerational Anglo-Celtic Canadian, it has been a growing experience throughout my career. One incident was when I handed out interview times to parents based on the information they had provided to me about when they wanted to come in. I did this as I was dismissing the children at my door. Well, one mother suddenly got very upset and in front of all the other parents said "I don't like that time" repeatedly. Well, I apologized to her

> and I explained the process I used to assign her a time. I explained to her that "I have this time or this time or this time and you can choose whatever you would like." Well, for this young woman, I believe what she heard me say was "whatever" and, in her culture, "whatever" is dismissive, which led to a huge upset and an accusation of racism and this was all done very publicly. Unfortunately, she stormed off and it took a lot of coaxing to get her back in and I explained to her that I had no intention of excluding her and I apologized that my use of language was interpreted to be dismissive, but it wasn't meant to be.

Although the teachers agreed that communication is critical to facilitating home-school partnerships with parents, they emphasized that for culturally and linguistically diverse parents, and especially those who may be new to the country, the reality is that they have to work more than one job. As a result, the teachers explained that it is difficult to connect with these parents to communicate with them as often as they would like. However, the teachers consistently emphasized that it is important to continue to try to reach these parents. This teacher explained:

> If I call them enough times, they will know that I am serious and they will know I care. It's about really helping them see that I care and want to work with them to help their children succeed…It may take time and several tries before I connect with them but I keep trying. I just wish I had more time. And for the parents who are new to our country, they just need to know teachers care. I mean they trust us with their children so to work with us and to do what we ask them to do, they really have to know and believe we want the best for their children.

Furthermore, the teachers emphasized that when working with diverse parents, it is important to be positive in the things that they say and to send consistent messages to parents about the critical need for them to become and remain involved in their children's learning. As 1 teacher noted,

> Communication with parents is absolutely vital. I don't think I could run a program where I am not talking to the parents and getting them involved. And not only for the bad things. I mean I only have two-and-a-half hours at school and if the parents aren't on board, it just doesn't work. I really talk to them and I give

> them what they need to spend time with their children at home. I do not expect them to teach their children. I mean it has taken me years and years to learn about effective strategies to teach early reading. I just expect them to reinforce what I am teaching and to really read to them. I talk to them, I send home tip sheets, I send home books, I send homework, and I do what I can to give them what they need. It all comes down to communication and more communication.

In addition, the teachers spoke passionately about the fact that all parents, irrespective of their abilities in English, can greatly enhance children's learning at school and that communication is the way to motivate parents to become actively involved in home-school partnerships to support and enhance their children's learning. One teacher emphasized that

> I think communicating with parents is very important. I think they are one of our biggest resources in helping children progress through school and I certainly feel that communication is the key to tapping into this resource. And I also feel that communicating with parents enables teachers to guide them on how to support their children's learning at home. I feel that there are many ways to communicate with parents but that communication is absolutely essential to enable parents to work with their children at home.

As this teacher shared, regular communication with all parents is fundamental in helping them become involved in their children's learning. It is through communication that teachers and parents are able to learn from each other and work together.

Summary of Theme 2, Research Question 1:

- Successful teachers communicate with diverse parents regularly to help them alleviate their anxiety and to help them realize that teachers want the best for their children.
- Successful teachers use strategies to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers to maintain regular communication with diverse parents.
- Having access to interpreters and individuals on staff who speak other languages makes it possible to communicate with all parents regularly.
- Successful teachers are persistent in their approach to reach all parents and to maintain open lines of communication with them.

Theme 3. Teachers and parents play specific roles in a home-school partnership.

In defining home-school partnerships with diverse parents, the teachers consistently explained that there are defined, specific roles for teachers and for parents, and they emphasized that both teachers' and parents' roles are equally important in contributing to children's learning. According to 1 teacher,

> Home-school partnerships are critical and I always tell the parents that I want the best thing for the children but that we are both very important stakeholders in this partnership and have much to contribute to this partnership. I let them know that as the child's teacher, I want their child to learn and to grow and this is what I am doing in class and this is what I need you [parents] to do at home. You need to support me and I will support you. And I think when you have teachers and parents working together in a partnership to support each other's efforts, the children will really, truly benefit. But when you have parents who don't do anything or who do very little, their children just fall behind. You can see that.

As this teacher shared, it is critical for teachers and parents to understand that they both need to become actively involved in these partnerships to support children's learning because neither teachers nor parents can singlehandedly guarantee children's learning. Therefore, the teachers shared that it becomes very important for them to communicate their expectations to parents explicitly as well as highlight the specific role that these parents play in home-school partnerships. As 1 teacher explained,

> As far as the parents' role is concerned, I explain to them that they really need to understand their child and to communicate about their child to the school. I tell them to be open to hearing what the school has to say and not just about the child's academics, but taking an interest in showing up when they are invited, to come and see what's going on in their child's classroom, and to try and support the child in the way that they are learning at school. And even if they want to do additional things with their child at home, I encourage them to not denigrate what the child is doing at school or say to the child that what they are doing at school isn't right. I also tell them that they need to be really open to their children being part of a culturally diverse school. And I think it's really, really important that they advocate for their children so if they feel uncomfortable, to come and share

> their concerns. And if their child is unhappy or really isn't doing well, they really need to come and to speak up. So I make it clear to them that they play a very important part in this partnership and that I cannot do it alone.

Similarly, the following teacher shared that irrespective of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds, perhaps the greatest role that these parents play in home-school partnerships is to work with their children at home to support and enhance the learning that happens at school. However, the teacher emphasized that diverse parents often need to be educated about the kinds of things they can do with their children at home:

> Parents have so many opportunities to work with their children at home and, in my mind, it doesn't matter where these parents come from, how long they've been in Canada, or what language they speak. They spend so much time with their children and they can do so much. But it is important for me to clearly explain the kinds of things they can be doing with their children. Many of these parents just have no idea that they need to be working with their children at home. So a large chunk of my time at the beginning of the school year is spent making this clear to them. And of course if language is an issue, I make sure I arrange for a translator to help us talk. And most times, when I invite parents to come in to speak to me, they will bring someone to help them talk to me if they are not able to speak in English. But I make sure someone is there to help me get my message across and to make sure I answer any questions they have.

According to the teachers, the necessity to educate diverse parents explicitly about their specific roles in a home-school partnership and what they can do to support their children's learning at home stems from the fact that many parents from diverse backgrounds may be from systems of education where teaching is explicitly the teachers' job and that learning stops once the school day is over. For example, 1 teacher shared that

> I have had parents that assume that teachers will do all the teaching and that there really is nothing they should or can be doing at home. For example, I've had parents say to me that it's my job to teach their children and that that is why there is an education system.

Therefore, the teachers emphasized that a very important role that they play in home-school partnerships is to be explicit with parents about the fact that they must become involved in their children's learning and to help parents understand their specific roles in these partnerships. According to these teachers,

> For me, it becomes very important to explain to parents that they play a huge part in children's learning so that a partnership is really half the teacher and half the parent. And I also believe that it is really important to emphasize to them that they are their child's first teacher so that if they are able to work with their child at home, this will greatly help their learning at school. They just don't realize this.
>
> And I think sometimes we really take for granted what the parents know. And it can seem simple to us, but they just don't know. So in our position as Kindergarten teachers, I think we really need to step back and really start from scratch with some of the parents. We need to explain what we are doing at school and what we need them to do at home. It's all about working with them and educating them about how we doing here. It's not easy, but it needs to be done.

However, many of the teachers noted that although the parents may not know how they can become involved in their children's learning, they are generally very interested in becoming involved and in working with teachers in partnership to support their children's learning. Therefore, these teachers stressed that they must give the parents the tools and support they need to work with their children at home:

> In working with diverse parents for over twenty years, I have seen that there may be a lack of time and a lack of money that prevents them from doing as much as they would like with their children, but I have found that by in large, there is absolutely no lack of interest. In fact, I have seen that the parents are very interested and motivated to help their children succeed and for many of them, that is the reason they came to Canada. So I really believe that if we give parents the support or guidance they need, if we really take the time to work with them, they will become our partners in children's education. And some of the parents who have less English feel less able to help their children but they still want to do whatever they can. So I think the onus really is on us as Kindergarten teachers to initiate and to sustain these partnerships.

Similarly, according to this teacher,

> And over the years, I have found that that is exactly what the parents want. They want to learn about what they can do to help their children succeed, and a lot of these parents have left horrible, horrible environments to come to Canada and they come here because they want the best for their children. And a lot of them just don't know what to do. They want the best for their children, but they struggle with what to do. So for us, it really comes down to educating them so that they can work with their children. And they don't know how to ask either. So you really have to build that rapport and build that bond so that they are comfortable with you and so that they come to you.

The teachers also explained that another role they play in these partnerships is to consistently acknowledge parents' efforts and to really help them understand that what they are doing for their children is helping them at school. As this teacher explained,

> And teachers often neglect to acknowledge parents' efforts in other areas. For example, if children are well fed and well rested for school, that plays a huge role in how much they will be able to learn at school and we never tell parents this. So we really need to let parents know that because they are taking care of their children at home, the children are coming to school ready and happy to learn. We really need to let them know this.

Furthermore, the teachers who had previously taught Kindergarten in schools with less diverse populations repeatedly emphasized that when focusing specifically on home-school partnerships with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, it is an absolute necessity for teachers to work closely with parents to educate them about the system of education in Canada, the expectations teachers have of children in Kindergarten, and the critical role parents play in their children's learning. One teacher explained:

> Home-school partnerships are so important in Kindergarten and they are absolutely critical if you are working in a diverse community. I think this is the reason why many teachers are reluctant to teach this grade. They are very scared because you really do take the children and their parents from being completely

> new to the school system and to the language, and that's huge. And it's also really helping the parents because maybe they have never had a child come to school in Canada before. So there is a whole level of teaching that is going to the parents and also to the child. It's really family oriented and there's so much that we have to tell the parents about what goes on in Kindergarten, what the expectations of school are, what the expectations of the children are, and what is appropriate for the children according to their age. And also about what is expected at home. So as Kindergarten teachers, not only are we setting up the children to succeed at school by empowering them with the language and helping them adjust to school, but we are also showing the parents how very important they are to their children's learning and helping them become involved in this learning. Many of these parents have no idea how important they are to their children's learning and how much they can do support their children's learning.

As this teacher shared, parents from diverse backgrounds are often unaware of strategies to use when working with their children at home. One teacher noted that parents sometimes put too much pressure on their children and do not realize the need to engage them in developmentally appropriate learning activities that will keep them motivated and interested in learning:

> Sometimes I feel that the work that the parents do with their children at home involves rote and memorizing and may not be appropriate for children. So for me, discussions with parents are an opportunity to talk to the parents nicely about the kinds of learning activities that are appropriate for young children. It really is all about educating the parents and helping them understand how best to support their children's learning. However, I really wish they spent time giving them experiences, showing them the world, taking them to the museum, going on a picnic, and really just speaking to them to build their vocabulary and their oral language skills. The parents would rather have the children stay home and copy the numbers from 1 to 100. So it's a big learning curve for parents. They want to see the math sheets, the writing sheets so I find a lot of time I am just educating the parents about appropriate ways of working with children.

In addition, the teachers explained that when working with culturally and linguistically diverse parents, it becomes important to understand that the parents may be restricted in their ability to become involved in their children's learning as a result of, for

example, their own level of education. In this case, the teachers shared that it becomes important to specifically support these parents by educating them about activities that they can successfully engage in with their children at home:

> We do a lot of parent teaching in this community and a lot of our parents in this community, especially the mums, have minimal, minimal education so that many of them are actually illiterate in their own language and they share with me that they are not able to read to their children in their own languages. So in this case, we teach the parents how to do a picture walk with their children. We model how to do this for the parents and we tell them not to even look at the words. We tell them to ask their children to look at the pictures and to tell the story through the pictures. We even encourage them to cover up the words. We also tell them to use the pictures to make predictions and to not worry at all about the words. I feel that this really empowers them and again it's all about helping them understand that they are so very important to their child's learning and the more they can support this learning at home, the more their child will learn.

When the teacher was asked about how she works with parents who may speak little or no English, she explained that there are several teachers on staff at her school who speak many of the languages spoken by the parents in the community. Therefore, when she wants to sit down with parents to have such discussions, she will arrange for a teacher to help her with the translations. She also emphasized that even though there are interpreters available through the school board, but she prefers asking other teachers to facilitate these conversations with parents because "parents are so much more comfortable with these teachers than they are with some stranger for the board."

However, the teachers agreed that the parents who struggle with the English language should try to learn the language so that they are more confident in their abilities to work with their children and also to work in partnership with the teachers. They

explained there are many government-funded programs available for parents who choose to learn English as a second language:

> And I also feel that the parents who struggle with the English language should really try to learn some English through the programs offered for adult learners. I feel that if they are able to learn some basic English skills, they will have much more confidence when it comes to working with their children. I mean I know that if I were to move to Bangladesh, I would need to learn some Bengali to help my child. It would be hard, but I would have to try.

Nevertheless, although parent and educator participation are both essential to sustaining home-school partnerships, Knoff and Raffaele (1999) stated that the onus for establishing a successful home-school partnership rests with the educators, who need to "examine the organizational climate that exists within schools and the messages about involvement that we send to parents" (p. 449). This assertion is supported by this teacher, who explained that

> Creating partnerships requires that at the classroom, at the school, and at the community level, there are structures and frameworks and protocols in place that allow for both formal and informal partnerships with parents. Whether that is through parenting centers, through family literacy and math nights, through the way the school dismisses, or through the ways parents are involved in the school. But there needs to be opportunities built into the day and into the year for teachers to invite parents to become actively involved in their children's learning. Teachers need to take advantage of these opportunities to initiate and sustain parent involvement.

Finally, the teachers conceded that although parents and teachers have very specific roles in home-school partnerships, parents are often unaware of the capacity of their role and of how to become involved in this partnership. Therefore, the teachers consistently emphasized that their greatest role in a home-school partnership is to educate parents about their role in this partnership and empower them with the support they need

to work with their children at home to help them learn early reading skills. With respect to the parents' role, the teachers explained that they expect the parents to use the support teachers give them to work with their children at home to the best of their abilities.

Summary of Theme 3, Research Question 1:

- Successful teachers educate parents about the system of education in Canada, and about the critical role that parents play in their children's learning.
- Successful teachers educate parents about the kinds of learning activities and experiences that are appropriate for young children.
- Parents' role in home-school partnerships is to use the support teachers provide to work with their children at home.

Research Question 2

According to these Kindergarten teachers, in what ways do home-school partnerships support children's development of early reading skills?

Kindergarten marks the beginning of a core transition in the life of young learners, and the early reading skills that children learn in Kindergarten are what enable them to benefit from formal reading instruction, which, in Ontario, Canada, begins in Grade 1. According to Neuman and Roskos (1998), early literacy learning is a highly social activity, and parents have many opportunities to promote their children's acquisition of early reading skills. Therefore, in working collaboratively in partnership with Kindergarten teachers, parents have the support they need to work with their children at home to help them learn these early reading skills.

During the in-depth interviews, the participants were asked a series of questions to explore their perceptions about how home-school partnerships support children's development of early reading skills. The teachers' responses were clustered around two

main themes. These themes are illustrated in Figure 2, and each theme is described in the section that follows.

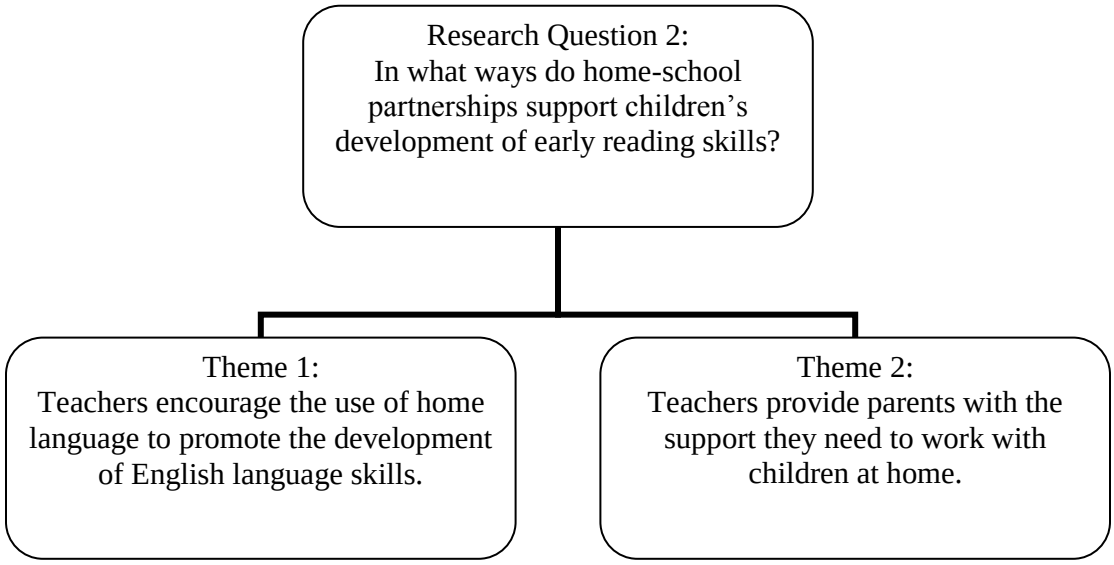

Figure 2. Diagram of themes for research question 2.

Theme 1. Teachers encourage the use of home language to promote the development of English language skills.

The teachers reported that the parents who do not speak English fluently are often concerned about how their children will learn to communicate in English. As a result, the teachers had observed that even the parents who have a very rudimentary knowledge of English stop communicating with their children in their home language and focus exclusively on English. For example, one teacher commented:

> I've learned that parents, especially in diverse communities, think that they should be speaking English. Whatever their abilities may be in English, they switch over to using English. So I've learned that it's really important to honor the first language. And you need to tell the parents how important it is for long term cognitive development for the child to learn the first language.

In addition to this teacher, other teachers agreed that many of them have had parents express their concerns about their children's development of English language skills. Therefore, the teachers explained that when they work in partnership with diverse parents, they spend a significant amount of their time explaining to them that if children are fluent in their home language, the language skills will transfer and will assist them in learning English. One teacher explained:

> And I really encourage parents to use their home language at home, and reading in their home language, and developing their home language. Some parents are really hesitant about using their home language because they worry their kids will fall behind in English. And so I really encourage that because in having taught in such a diverse community for so many years, I've observed that the knowledge transfers over. And also, I encourage parents to use their first language at home because I have read the research, which clearly shows that the skills will transfer over. I let parents know this very early on.

Moreover, most of the teachers explained that although they were initially hesitant to encourage parents to use their home language to support children's development of reading and other literacy skills, they shared that after having worked with diverse parents for many years, they realize that if parents use their home language at home, and if the children are instructed in English at school and have many opportunities to engage in learning activities at school, the children will pick up English quickly. Therefore, most of the teachers reported that they understand the value of the home language in facilitating children's development of English language skills. According to one teacher,

> Literacy is literacy and reading is reading whether we use English or we use another language. We know that early literacy develops the foundations of language that gets the children's brains wired to learn literacy skills. I've told parents that it's my job to instruct in English and any support they can give in English at home is great but I've really emphasized to parents that as long as their child is engaged in literacy activities at home, it doesn't matter what language the

> parents use. I tell them that as long as literacy is valued at home, that's the key. So things like writing letters to cousins and aunties in the home language. These kinds of things cannot be done at school because I do not know how to spell the names of the family members and there just isn't enough time. But at home, there is so much parents can do. And it's really all about getting children excited about literacy and reading and so, in this regard, it doesn't matter what language the parents use at home.

As this teacher explained, when working in partnership with parents, it becomes very important for teachers to continue to encourage parents to use their first language at home. According to these teachers, many parents focus exclusively on helping their children learn the English language and lose sight of preserving their home language. They explained that although the children will learn English from exposure at school and through, for example, television, once they lose their home language, they will lose much more than just a language. As one teacher explained, this can have a detrimental effect:

> And I find that around the issue of first language, I have had a lot of parents say to me that they want their child to learn English and so they will not send their child to, for example, Urdu school. So I really have to step back and explain this to them. And what I am really concerned about now, and have always been concerned about, is the increasing number of children who are losing their first language. Lately, what I have been noticing is that we have more and more children losing their first language but their parents are not acquiring English. So now we have a divide between parent and child and the parents want so much for their children to learn English and to do well in school, but they don't have the long term vision that down the road, this child will still need to talk to you [the parent] about very sophisticated and complex issues. And if the children are losing their first language, but the parent is not learning the English language, how will this type of communication happen? So the children are not going to have the vocabulary or the reference points to talk about peer pressure, or bullying, or harassment, or all those serious issues where they need both parents, so I am really worried about that.

As this teacher emphasized, it is critical for parents to preserve children's home language in order to facilitate their acquisition of English language skills and, more importantly, to ensure that they will be able to communicate with their children in the future.

In addition, in cases where the parents have a very limited grasp of the English language, the teachers consistently stressed that they work with interpreters, other parents in the community, or teachers or other members on staff to get their message across to these parents to use their home language to work with their children at home, noting that "I would rather the parents not speak to their children in English than pass on broken English to the children." Therefore, as part of their home-school partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse parents, the teachers reported the importance of educating parents about the critical need to continue to work with their children in their home language. In so doing, the teachers reported that they are then able to ensure that the parents are working with their children to the best of their abilities in helping them to develop important oral language skills and other literacy skills. The teachers further explained that if they were to focus solely on the English language and encourage the parents to use only English when working with their children, the children would stand to lose much of what their parents can teach them.

Nevertheless, although the majority of the teachers reported being familiar with the research on bilingual language development and the positive influence of a first language on the development of a second language, one teacher explained that even though she always supports the parents' use of their home language to engage their

children in reading and other learning activities, she still prefers to encourage them to expose their children to some English:

> I encourage parents to read to children in their home language but I also stress reading in English and having experiences in English, whether it's getting taped books from the library or watching educational shows on television. At this early age, I find that it's important for children to develop their vocabulary and learn some English grammar. I find that if they don't have the background knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, they cannot progress in their reading ability, even if they are fluent in their own language. So if they are learning both languages at the same time, it is great, but I find that it is important to teach the children English alongside the other language.

Although this teacher understands that fluency in the children's home language can facilitate their acquisition of language skills in English, it is clear that she hesitated when it came to telling parents to focus exclusively on using their home language to work with their children at home. Although this was not a common finding, 1 teacher did explain that she has experienced hesitation from her colleagues when it comes to encouraging parents to use their home language to work with children at home:

> I encourage parents to use their home language for all reading activities at home. That is my biggest thing right now. I always tell the parents to use their first language with their child. But I find that teachers really struggle with that because while they will acknowledge that it is important for the child to keep learning and keep speaking in the home language, in the same breath, they will say that the child is at a disadvantage because he or she doesn't have much English at home. So I always stress that that is not a disadvantage and I am always encouraging the Kindergarten teachers I work with to continue to encourage the parents to work with their children in their home language. The research shows that children will learn English faster if they have the language skills and concepts in their first language. But it is not always easy to convince teachers.

In having analyzed the documents that the teachers sent home with the children, such as newsletters and homework activities, it was evident that the teachers do support the use of the home language for engaging children in reading activities at home. For

example, in their monthly newsletters, almost all of the teachers had mentioned that parents should "continue to speak to your children in your own language," and 1 teacher even asked parents to "show your child how to write his or her name in your language." In addition to these newsletters, some teachers also sent homework that required the parents to use their home language with their children. For example, 1 teacher sent home an activity sheet that required the children to use their home language to write down the translations of words such as uncle, aunt, grandpa, and grandma. Such activities are extremely useful in allowing the children to see the connection between the English language they use to learn at school and their home language.

Summary of Theme 1, Research Question 2:

- Successful teachers encourage parents from diverse backgrounds to use their home language with their children so parents are able to work with their children at home to the best of their abilities.
- Successful teachers educate parents about the importance of fluency in the first language in their children's development of English language skills.

Theme 2. Teachers provide parents with the support they need to work with children at home.

According to the teachers, home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are very important because they give teachers the opportunity to empower parents with the support that they may need to work with their children at home. The teachers reported that although parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are genuinely interested in helping their children learn the early reading skills they need to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1, many of them struggle with how they can facilitate this learning. The teachers explained:

> The parents want their children to read. They want them to do well. But they just don't know what to do. And if you explain to them about the kinds of things they can do at home to help the kids come along, they will be very happy. They just need help and, as teachers, what good would we be if we didn't share our knowledge with them. We need to help them.
>
> Parents are very eager to help their children…And the new immigrant families, they are very eager and very keen so they jump right on board and become quite involved in working with their children at home. For example, they are very happy with the books which have just one word on each page because it helps their children learn new vocabulary. And they also work hard with them. So if I give them strategies, they have some ideas about what do at home.

Similarly, another teacher shared that

> Most parents are very receptive. They actually want any help they can get when it comes to working with their children at home. They want to know what they can do at home to help their children and, for the most part, I have observed that given this support from us, they really do their best.

As evident in the teachers' comments, the parents want to help their children and are eager to do so. Given support and resources, they become involved immediately. Therefore, the teachers repeatedly shared that in a home-school partnership with diverse parents, it is important to spend time helping parents understand the kinds of things they can be doing at home:

> I share with them different reading strategies. Again, it depends on how they grew up so I have parents who say they hide the pictures from children because their children are using the pictures to read. So I take the opportunity to explain to parents that it is okay if children are using pictures to read and that this is very important reading strategy for them to use. And parents share that they are teaching their children to sound out words letter by letter so I share other more effective strategies that they can use to begin to decode simple words. So during parent conferences, I spend a lot of time sharing these important strategies with them. But if I see that the child is really struggling in class, I will phone the parents or invite them to come in one day so we can talk about these issues. I feel that in a partnership, we really have to reach out to them. We have to help them.

This teacher explained that if she is working with parents who are new to the English language, she will arrange for interpreters to help get her information across to parents. However, if she has the inclination that the parents are not going to be able to work with their children at home, she encourages the parents to have older siblings or, in some cases, cousins or other family members work with the children.

Therefore, most of the teachers conceded that the intent is to empower parents with a variety of strategies to use when working with their children at home, but if the teachers realize or observe that the parents are not comfortable using these strategies or do not have the time or the ability to work with their children at home, then it becomes important for the teachers to connect parents to other individuals who can help them:

> For the parents we serve in this very diverse community, extended families play a very important role in the children's upbringing. I mean I'm talking about cousins, uncles, aunts, grandmas, and grandpas all living together under one roof or at least in the same neighborhood. And so I always encourage parents to have older siblings or older cousins work with their children on these skills. I have found that it is really important to educate parents about the fact that anyone can help their children at home and the idea really is for their children to get this help. So after having worked with the parents for a while, the really neat thing is that when I have conferences with them, many will bring older siblings or cousins so that I can tell them [siblings and cousins] the strategies to use to work with these children at home.

The teachers also explained that if there are children who are not getting as much support at home as they need, they will try to find extra time during the instructional day to work more closely with these children. One teacher stated:

> We have to do what we can to make sure these kids are getting the support they need. If they are not getting it at home, we need to make sure they get it at school. Time is always a challenge but we have to get creative. I personally like using student teachers who are doing their teaching internships in my class to work with these kids. I actually sign up to have student teachers in my class every year so

> that that there is an extra body in the classroom to work with the neediest kids. I would love to work with these kids myself but the reality is that when you only have two-and-a-half hours and 25 4- and 5-year olds, there is only so much you can do.

In addition, the teachers shared their observations that for the parents who do work with their children at home, these parents often do not have a repertoire of developmentally appropriate strategies they can use to help their children develop reading skills, noting that the parents are often using strategies that are ineffective in working with children. Therefore, the teachers asserted that by involving parents in a home-school partnership, they are able to provide them with the support they need, such as a list of strategies to use when reading with children. Moreover, the teachers emphasized that in order to support parents, it is important not only to share strategies that they can use at home but also to model these strategies for them. For example, 1 teacher explained that

> I really believe in sitting down with the parents and modeling what they can be doing with reading at home. For example, I'd explain to the parents that it's important to look at the pictures and to read the pictures. I'd share with them that even if they are incorrectly reading the words or even making up the story as they are going along, they should encourage this type of behavior. When children are little, they do not know what reading means so we can really make this a fun learning process for them. I tell them that reading is all about meaning making and so you start by reading your name and looking at the pictures in a book. I would tell parents that they should really focus on all the pre-reading or early reading skills that children need to have before they can learn how to read successfully. Things like reading the pictures and making meaning. So it's so important for them to have the same starting chance and children have that chance when they have the pre-reading skills they need. It's so important.

In addition to sharing and modeling strategies that parents can use when working on reading skills, the teachers also explained that they send home homework to guide the parents' efforts so that the parents know what they need to be working on with their

children. Many of the teachers reported that parents often engage their children in tasks involving rote skills or memorization; therefore, by sending homework with the children, the parents develop a better understanding of the kinds of skills they should be focusing on. The teachers explained that it is important for them to provide the parents with this kind of support:

> Also, the homework program that I have set up helps them focus their efforts on the skills that the children should be learning such as, for example, the development of their vocabulary skills. This homework gives parents an understanding of the kind of learning they should be engaging their children in at home, and it really helps to guide their efforts as they work with their children at home. And by sending home this type of homework, I am really able to make sure that the parents focus on the skills that we want the children to be learning rather than the drill work that many parents have their children doing on a regular basis. Guiding their efforts really is very important.

Moreover, the teachers also reported that because they are working with parents in partnership to support children's learning, it is critical for them to understand how parents perceive the help they receive from teachers, whether this help benefits them as they strive to work with their children at home, and ways they can improve the type of support they provide and the way they deliver this support so that it is more meaningful for the parents. In order to do so, 1 teacher explained:

> I always ask the parents about whether they have any questions about the homework, or whether they have questions about what I am asking them to do at home. In this way, by me asking them the questions, I am hoping it becomes easier for them to approach me with their questions or concerns if they need to. I think this is important because in order for them to continue working with their children at home, they need to feel comfortable about what they are doing. And I really don't think they could do anything wrong. If they are spending time with their child at home, it can't be wrong. But some parents are more comfortable with what they are doing than others, and I just like to make sure that all parents are comfortable. So, it is important to address their questions or concerns.

The teachers emphasized that by giving the parents an opportunity to explain how they perceive the support they receive from the teachers, the parents realize that they are valued in the home-school partnership and that the teachers are genuinely interested in working with them to help their children succeed. They explained that if the parents are not able to communicate well in English, they will arrange for an interpreter or a staff member at the school to help them get this information.

In addition, the teachers shared that by the time the children have completed the 2-year Kindergarten program (i.e., Junior and Senior Kindergarten), the parents have a much better understanding of how to support and enhance their children's learning:

> I have found that throughout the time their children are in Kindergarten, and especially by the time they finish senior Kindergarten and move on to Grade 1, parents have really begun to understand more about the education system here and how we do things in Ontario. They might not agree with the system here but I know that they understand how we do things here and how so very important it is to work with us to support their children's academic success.

Summary of Theme 2, Research Question 2:

- Successful teachers help parents develop a repertoire of developmentally appropriate learning strategies to use to support children's development of early reading skills at home.
- Successful teachers model how to use these strategies effectively.
- Successful teachers send home work to guide parents' efforts as they work with their children.
- Successful teachers get feedback from parents to understand how to modify the work they send home and how to support parents further.
- Successful teachers help parents understand that if they are unable to work with their children at home, it is important for them to arrange for others to work with their children (e.g., older cousins, uncles, aunts, tutors).

Research Question 3

What are some strategies that these Kindergarten teachers use to communicate with parents on a regular basis?

The teachers in this study repeatedly and consistently emphasized the need to engage in open, two-way communication with the parents, explaining that communication is the quintessential link that ties the home to the school. This need was supported by Weiss and Edwards (1992), who explained that effective communication is the the foundation of all family involvment in education and that an underlying goal of communication is to "provide consistent messages to famliies that the school will work with them in a collaborative way to promote the educational success of the student" (p. 235).

During the in-depth interviews, the participants were asked a series of questions to explore their perceptions regarding the strategies they use to communicate with parents. The teachers' responses were clustered around two main themes. These themes are illustrated in Figure 3, and each theme is described in the section that follows.

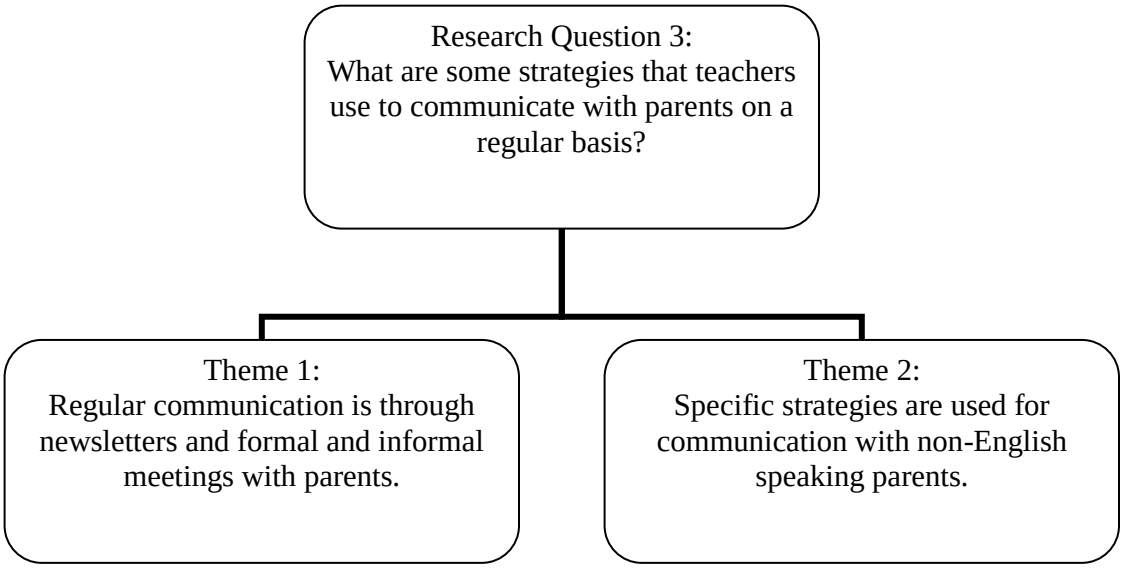

Figure 3. Diagram of themes for research question 3.

Theme 1. Regular communication is through newsletters and formal and informal meetings with parents.

The teachers shared that in their position as Kindergarten teachers, they have the unique opportunity to see most parents on a regular basis when they drop off or pick up their children at school. As a result, many teachers explained that they take this opportunity to speak to the parents about things that may have come up during the day:

> We are really lucky in Kindergarten because the parents come to pick up their children and we finish at a different time than the rest of the school, even by 10 minutes, so it means that you have some sort of contact with them on a daily basis, at least with the majority of them. Very few of the children are picked up by babysitters or daycare staff, and we have no buses here, so for the most part, we can get to see most parents on a daily basis. So, if there is something that you need to talk to them about, you can bring them in. So, I think having this opportunity to speak to them whenever the need arises, and in person, is great because if there is a serious issue that will come up in the report card, for example, they will not be surprised. And sometimes it's a matter of just bringing them in and going over your program again, explaining to them that this is really important and I really need you to help your child at home so that he or she can understand this better. And I give them ideas to help them work on whatever it is that the child may need support with. So seeing parents on a daily basis really helps.

In addition to talking to parents informally at the door or inviting them into the classroom for a quick conversation, the teachers explained that a major strategy they use to communicate with the parents regularly is through monthly newsletters that are sent home. All of the teachers agreed that the newsletters are instrumental in keeping the parents informed about what is happening in the classroom, what the children are learning about, any upcoming events at the school, and other general information related to the Kindergarten program. Furthermore, from the analysis of the documents, it became clear that the teachers who have successfully established partnerships with the parents use

a significant portion of their newsletters as a “tip sheet” to inform parents about the kinds of skills they should be working on at home and giving them examples of activities to engage in with their children to promote the development of their early reading and literacy skills. For example, in one of her newsletters, a teacher sent home information about the stages of writing development for children. According to this teacher, sending this type of information helps the parents to understand that the children are on a learning continuum. By using this information, they are able to keep track of their children’s progress. She also shared that “I will sit down with parents and help them understand this information I send home. If they come to me with their questions, I am happy to address them.”

The analysis of the newsletters that are sent home also indicated that the teachers used very simple English, lots of visuals, and a consistent format from one month to the next in the way that they present the information. When asked why these newsletters are organized in the manner that they are, the teachers explained that having worked with linguistically diverse parents, they have experienced that the parents are better able to understand the information when it is presented in a consistent format from one month to the next. Moreover, 1 teacher explained that in the context of her school, the parents are busy with shift work and are not able to come to the school as frequently as she would like. As a result, she uses her newsletters to share much of her information with parents, and she explained that she prints many pictures in her newsletters so parents are able to both read about and visually see the experiences their children are having at school:

> I take photographs and print them in my newsletter is to give parents an idea or visual all of what is going on in our classroom. This is important because the children tell them what they're doing in class and the parents may not understand or visualize what their children are describing. So I take the photos to give the parents an idea of what their children are doing in class. So for the parents, what the children may be describing is likely very foreign to them and my hope is that the photos help them understand what their children are describing. I really believe that the photos give than a sense of what is going on in the classroom. So in my newsletters, I have these photographs. As you can see, I also like to use part of my newsletter to talk about what the children are learning at school, and I like to do a feature on the different learning centers that we have in our classroom. For example, I will talk about the writing center or the drama center.

This teacher further explained that for many of the parents, the learning activities that the children engage in at school are very foreign; therefore, by printing these pictures in the newsletters, she can help the parents really understand more about what their children learn at school and the types of learning centers that are organized to facilitate this learning.

In addition, the teachers explained that the newsletters enable them to give all parents the same information at one time, plus they really help the teachers ensure that they are sending consistent messages to the parents. According to one teacher, "I think trying to send a consistent message to parents is very important and that is why I like things like newsletters. As a general rule, I like to send everybody out the same information at the same time." Similarly, another teacher commented:

> When I write the newsletters, I am very consistent. Parents know to expect a newsletter from school on the first of every month. And the format of these newsletters is also very consistent so that parents know what to expect in these newsletters. For example, they know that the newsletters will tell them about what their child is learning at school, when their child has gym or library, and information about snack programs. Essentially, I have found that if you follow a consistent format in these newsletters right from the beginning of the school year, parents know the kind of information to expect and they know where to look for

> this information once they receive the newsletters. I think it is a great way to reach parents whom we don't get to see as often as we'd like.

Moreover, the teachers explained that in contrast with communicating with parents verbally and not being sure of how much of this information they have understood, when they print the information in newsletters, they find that the parents are able to get someone to help them access the information presented in it. One teacher explained:

> I think some people can read English better and understand written information much more than information presented to them orally. Last week I had an interview with a parent who was able to understand everything I said, but was not able to speak to me in English. She didn't feel comfortable enough to speak to me in English and had her son speak to me on her behalf. But I could tell that she understood everything I was saying because her follow-up questions were related to what I was saying. So I feel that information in newsletters is much more accessible for parents. They can read the information at their own pace and try to understand it, or they can ask someone to help them. But I will also use simple English free of any jargon we use.

However, as 1 teacher shared, it is important to take the time to reflect on how accessible the information on these newsletters is for parents who are not English speaking:

> I like sending home things newsletters but I find that my newsletters can get a bit wordy and so they are not accessible to all our parents. I mean if I was teaching in a primarily English speaking school, these newsletters would be great. Everyone or mostly everyone would understand them and my information would get to the parents. But in our community, the reality is that English is a struggle for parents and so these newsletters are not the best thing for them, especially if they are very wordy. So I don't think I would ever stop sending these newsletters home, but I do feel I need to spend more time trying to make them more reader friendly for our parents in this community.

Moreover, the teachers explained that another strategy they use to communicate with parents regularly is through more formal parent-teacher conferences. They invite the parents to come to the school to meet with them at a time that is convenient for the parents. The teachers explained that although these conferences give them an opportunity

to talk to parents privately, it is often difficult to conduct these conferences with parents who speak little or no English. However, the teachers emphasized that even though it is possible to request for interpreters through the school board, they are not always available when they are needed, and the teachers agreed that these interpreters need to be more easily accessible:

> I believe very strongly that we need to and we must invest in the resources to support interpretation during the conferences with parents and we should have these interpreters available whenever we want to sit down with parents. But you have to be careful with issues around confidentiality. So that's why I think it's really important that the board invest in resources so that we have properly trained interpreters.

Finally, the teachers explained that when working with culturally and linguistically diverse parents, communication over the phone can be very challenging. Parents, especially those who struggle with the language, may have difficulty understanding what the teacher is saying. Therefore, most of the teachers conceded that they do not prefer calling the parents unless it is absolutely urgent and believe that communication with these parents should be done in person as much as possible. According to these teachers:

> I avoid making phone calls if I can. I find it challenging to talk to them without having the opportunity to see their facial expressions. I like to see their initial reactions to the information that I am giving them. This is especially true if English is not their first language. So the phone calls are challenging because I have no indication about whether they are truly understanding what I am saying and how they feel about what I am saying to them.
>
> I think that when language is a barrier, it is really important to have face-to-face communication so that you can gauge how much the parents understand and give them the benefit of body language to help them with this understanding. When I speak with them on the phone, I have no way of knowing whether they got the message so I really do prefer face-to-face communication.

Summary of Theme 1, Research Question 3:

- Successful teachers take advantage of the many opportunities they have to talk to parents (e.g., during drop-off and pick-up times).
- Successful teachers send home monthly newsletters to inform parents about what the children are learning, any upcoming events, and other general information so that parents feel connected to their children's education.
- The information in a newsletter is presented using simple English, many visuals (e.g., photos), and in a consistent format from one month to the next so parents know exactly what to expect.
- Successful teachers include literacy tips on these newsletters for parents to use with their children at home.
- Successful teachers invite all parents to attend formal parent-teacher conferences and teachers arrange for interpreters or other individuals on staff to assist parents who may speak little or no English.
- Face-to-face communication is more effective than communication on the phone with parents who may speak limited English.

Theme 2. Specific strategies are used for communication with non-English speaking parents.

Although the teachers mentioned that communicating with parents on a regular basis is critical to sustaining home-school partnerships, they conceded that the language barrier is a huge impediment to communication when working with diverse parents. However, having spent several years teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, these teachers reported having developed many strategies that enable them to communicate with parents. For example, when it comes to important notices that are sent home from the school, such as information about school closure or an upcoming event that parents need to attend, the teachers ensure that these letters are translated into several languages that are dominantly used in the community. They explained that although the parents often have friends, neighbors, or relatives who can help them

translate written information, if this information is absolutely critical, it is always translated to ensure that the parents have immediate access to this information:

> We have translations available for important letters that go home or for something important that needs to be signed and returned to school. These translations are done by my assistant and the translations are offered in several of the predominant languages spoken by the families in this community. It really is great to have someone like that on staff. Someone who can help to bridge the gap between the home and the school by helping alleviate the language barrier.

In addition to sending home information that is translated for the parents, the teachers explained that when they are having a face-to-face conversation with parents who may have very little understanding of the English langauge, they find it very helpful to use visuals and to "show"the parents the message they are trying to convey to them. One teacher explained:

> We use a lot of visuals. For example, in the winter when we need the children to bring in indoor shoes, we have a really large shoe that we stick on our door so that parents can see it. And then on the shoe, we write their name so they can see that it is labeled. And this is really helpful because a lot of times, if the parents do not feel comfortable to come and speak to you, they will ask other parents to explain what it's all about. But by seeing this visual on the window, they know that there is something important we are trying to convey to them so we find that we get a lot more questions. And if we don't get the questions directly, we see parents talking to other parents to find out what it is about. So visuals really help.

The teachers also explained that in addition to these visuals, they use a lot of gestures to communicate with the parents:

> If I am actually talking to them personally, I use a lot of gestures. I also try to address issues through the child. I don't have the child translate, but I pull out the child's work sample and I physically show them what the child is having trouble with rather than giving wordy explanations. I show the parents what the child is having trouble with so they can see what I am talking about. I don't believe in having children translate for parents at all.

In addition, the teachers also reported that if they are trying to communicate with parents when the parents are dropping off or picking up their children, and if they are not able to get their message across, they often ask parents who may be around to help translate for them. They explained that the parents are happy to help them out in this way and the teachers are comforted knowing that they were able to get their message across. One teacher explained:

> If there is a pressing issue that I need to talk to a parent about right when the parent is dropping off or picking up the child, and as long as it is not a confidential issue, I always ask parents who are around to help me out. And they really are happy to do that. So it really helps to count on them for little things like translating for you because you know that your message was delivered. I try my best to explain using gestures, simple English and all but sometimes they just can't understand what I am saying. Parents' help in this way is really appreciated.

Although all of the teachers reported using visuals and gestures to communicate with parents with limited English, they emphasized that they use visuals and gestures only to communicate information that is not critical, explaining that "we only use gestures and visuals to get our day-to-day housekeeping and other logistical information to parents. There is a lot of that in Kindergarten. Everything from 'bring your indoor shoes' to 'don't forget to bring a healthy snack'." Therefore, the teachers commented that if there is ever a serious issue that needs to be addressed, or when the parents are invited to more formal parent-teacher conferences, the teachers always ensure that there are interpreters available to help the parents understand everything that is communicated to them. However, the teachers explained that although they can request interpreters for these meetings and conferences with the parents, they have observed that the parents are

far less intimidated during these meetings when other teachers or members on the school staff, rather than interpreters from the school board, help them with translations.

Furthermore, the teachers explained that the parents are extremely resourceful and that if they need to speak to the teacher, or if they are invited to these meetings, they will often take the initiative to bring a friend, a relative, or a neighbor to help them with this communication:

> Sometimes, parents bring in their own translators including family members or neighbors. These are not official translators that we can access through our school board, but they are people the parents are comfortable with. And I really encourage parents to bring in translators so that they able to communicate with me openly. But I always tell parents that we can arrange for interpreters if they prefer to don't know someone who can help them or if they prefer to have an outside person help them.

In sharing their experiences related to communicating with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, the teachers extensively talked about just how anxious parents are and how conscious they are of their limited abilities in English. To help ease this anxiety, the teachers noted that they encourage the parents to take their time to get their message across. For example, 1 teacher explained that when she communicates with parents who are struggling to get their message across, it becomes very important that she acknowledge their efforts and really communicate to them that what they have to share is valuable. This teacher explained:

> And sometimes I find that the parents are very hard on themselves and they say "I don't speak very much English" and I keep reminding them that them that "you speak a lot more English than I speak Punjabi or Gujarati or Cantonese or Somali." But usually I find that if you say to them that "you are doing fine" or that "your English is absolutely fine," this relaxes them quite a bit. And you know what, we can communicate with them. We really can. Like I say, a lot of it is using gestures and I often find myself running around the classroom looking for

> something to show them to help them understand what I am saying. The idea is just to let them know to do the best they can to get their message across and to help them see that their thoughts are very valuable to use.

In addition, the teachers reported that to help relieve the anxiety that the parents feel, these teachers always use very simple English when speaking to them. One teacher explained that the English she uses is as "broken" as the English the parents use. She asserted that this helps her to get her message across and that it also helps the parents feel far less intimated:

> So for me, the English I use becomes just as broken as the English the parents use because that is the best way I can communicate with them. It calms them down to hear me speak in the same way they do. I'm not sure what it is, but it helps them. And I'll use two- or three-word sentences like "shoes, Velcro, tomorrow." So again, I'll use very basic sentences. It really helps.

However, the teachers consistently emphasized that regardless of the strategies that they decide to use to communicate with these diverse parents, it is very important to maintain their integrity and to be cautious not to embarrass them in any way. The teachers explained that if the parents are embarrassed in any way, they will be much less likely to approach the teachers with their questions, concerns, or comments.

Summary of Theme 2, Research Question 3:

- Successful teachers ensure that all essential communications sent home are translated.
- Successful teachers use many visuals, gestures, and very simple English when speaking to parents with limited English to ensure that they understand the message(s) being conveyed to them.
- Successful teachers ask parents of other children and adults on staff to help communicate with parents with little or no English.

Research Question 4

In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers reach out to parents to establish and facilitate partnerships with them?

Corrigan and Bishop (1997) reported that establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships with parents should be a professional obligation because the research has consistently supported the benefits of these partnerships to students' learning. However, they reported that these partnerships are successful only if parents are genuinely motivated to become involved in these partnerships with teachers. This finding wassupported by the teachers in this study, who agreed that in order to establish and facilitate successful partnerships with parents, specifically those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, it becomes critical to build positive relationships with them so that they are are genuinely motivated to become involved in their children's learning. The teachers explained that these partnerships should be an important part of every Kindergarten program because they are absolutely essential in assuring that children get the practice they need at home to internalize the early reading skills to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1. Further, the teachers emphasized that the parents become involved in these partnerships only if they are presented with myriad opportunities to become engaged in their children's learning.

During the in-depth interviews, the participants were asked a series of questions to explore their perceptions about the strategies they use to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse parents. The teachers' responses were clustered around two main themes. These themes are illustrated in Figure 4, and each theme is described in the section that follows.

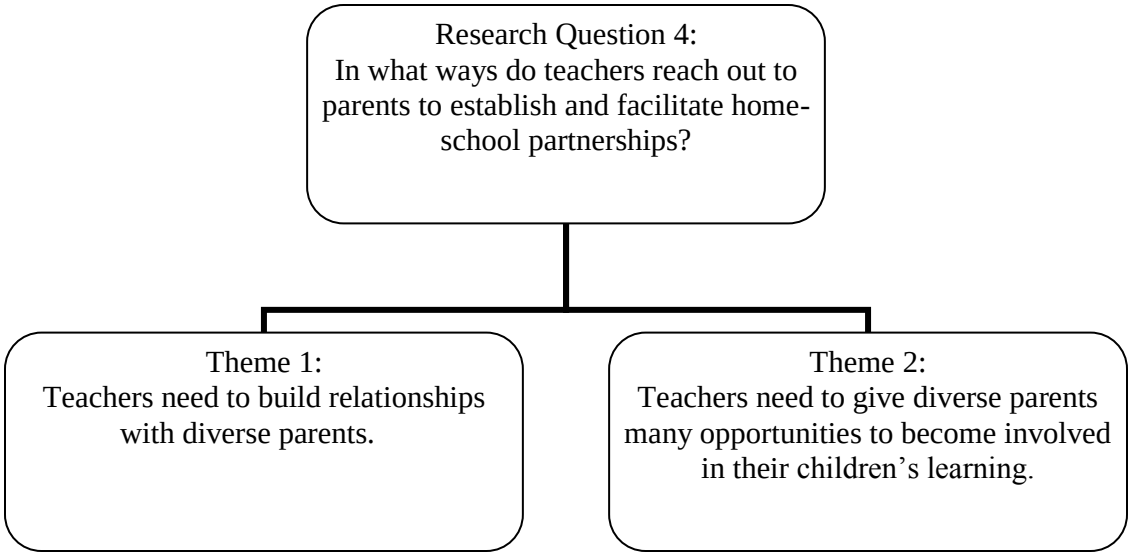

Figure 4. Diagram of themes for research question 4.

Theme 1. Teachers need to build relationships with diverse parents.

According to the teachers, a prerequisite to establishing and facilitating partnerships with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is to build positive working relationships with them. They explained that by building relationships with parents, they are able to work closely with parents so that they have the opportunity to realize that the teachers really want the best for their children. The teachers emphasized that once the parents understand that the teachers have the same vision for their children as they do, the parents are happy to become partners in their children's learning, and they become motivated to work with the teachers to support this learning.

The teachers further asserted that to build any kind of a relationship with parents from diverse backgrounds, they must become familiar with the cultural patterns of the children and their families in order to be responsive to the ways in which these cultural

patterns may affect their relationships. They consistently emphasized that teachers serving diverse populations should attend events organized by the community, read professional literature, and immerse themselves in learning as much as they can about the cultures of the children they serve. According to 1 teacher,

> I learn so much about the children's cultures by participating in the social and cultural activities organized in this community. By attending one barbecue on a Saturday, I was able to observe how important extended families are in some of these cultures. It really helped me to understand why there are always so many different people coming to pick up or drop off the children. I learned that to these families, there really is no difference between the extended family and the immediate family. So now when I have something important to share about the child, I don't wait until I see the parents. I will share this with any member of the child's extended family. It really was an enlightening experience for me.

These teachers shared that working in partnership with parents from diverse backgrounds requires them to take the time to really understand the parents' cultures and to be able to acknowledge and accept the fact that their participation in the partnership may largely be governed by their cultural norms.

For example, 1 teacher shared that even though a parent was genuinely interested in learning about how to read with her child at home, she was not comfortable making eye contact with the teacher during conversations with her. In her culture, making eye contact with the teacher was considered very disrespectful. This teacher explained that as difficult as it was for her to speak to a parent without making eye contact, it was important for her to understand and respect this cultural norm in order to realize that this mother was not being rude or, as she described, "standoffish." She also explained that she had to be careful in the way that she spoke to this parent and the tone of voice that she

used so that the parent did not feel disrespected in any way. Similarly, another teacher explained that

> It helps to know the culture of the children and that is why I am staying in this area because it takes you a while before you can understand where they are coming from. It is important to understand their culture but that doesn't mean that you have to be from that background. You just have to be open to learning new things. Quite frankly, when I think about the children, my culture has very little to do with their day-to-day activities, and I know very little about the culture of the children and their families. So I really, truly have to be open to learn that so I can better accomplish what I need to. I need to have an open mind, and I can't be judgmental.

Moreover, another teacher also emphasized the fact that in order to build relationships with diverse parents, it is very important for teachers to be nonjudgmental when working with these parents:

> I think you have to have the ability to park your bias at the door. We have to understand the difference between equity and equality and we have to understand that we don't know the conditions that the parents are coming from. And we have to understand that the parents are giving you the best of them. So as part of that, you need to educate yourself about the different lived experiences and the different cultural norms. So the two qualities that I think are essential to build relationships with parents are compassion and being non-judgmental. On top of that, it is also very important to build your cultural competence.

In addition, the teachers highlighted that the most important first steps in building relationships with diverse parents is building rapport with them. According to 1 teacher,

> Establishing rapport is what is needed to connect with them [diverse parents]. Before we can work with them in partnership, we need to strike a relationship with them, and this begins with establishing rapport. And it starts by making a lot of eye contact and smiling. I always get right down on the child's level and I really focus on the child so that shows the parent that my priority is the child. And it also shows the parents that I am comfortable with and engage with the children appropriately. I also make sure that I follow up with a parent if the child is sick or if the child fell in school so that the parent knows that I'm interested in the whole child and not just in teaching the curriculum.

Similarly, the following teacher explained that

> I think that you have to first establish a relationship. This is very, very important. And to do this, you have to bear in mind where they are coming from and understand that parents are doing the best they can for their child. And once you have their trust, you can do anything you'd like. But you must initially build that trust. And you need to tell them that their language is valued and what they are doing at home is valued. Tell them that we want to hear about what you [the parent] are doing. Just ask them to come and tell you some of their stories. They have to know that they are valued.

When asked about how he establishes relationships with parents who may not speak much English, this teacher explained:

> I don't believe that issues around language have ever prevented me from building relationships with parents. Don't get me wrong. I mean it is challenging to initiate and to maintain these relationships when we don't have a common language to communicate in with each other, but it can be as simple as getting someone to translate and to help us communicate. There are so many people who can help us. And other than grandparents, I have found that most parents often have just enough English so that we can get by. Gestures also help. So I strongly feel that the key to creating these relationships is to show parents that we care about them, their children, and that we value and really respect their culture. By showing up to community events they organize, by smiling and making eye contact, and by getting important messages to them, whether it's through translations or through teachers or students at the school or parents who may be around, I think we just need to show them we care enough to make the effort. So while language is definitely an issue, I don't think that it should prevent us from building strong, positive relationships with parents. We have to work around the whole language issue. It's hard, but it's doable. And it's important for us to find ways to deal with issues around language because the demographics in our schools are changing. An increasing number of our students are from diverse backgrounds. This is now our reality.

As this teacher explained, most teachers agreed that although it is not easy to work with parents who may not speak much English, there is support available to overcome this language barrier. As this teacher asserted, it is important for all teachers to find ways to address issues around language because our schools are becoming more diverse. Another teacher echoed this teacher's thoughts when she shared that what is important in building

these relationships is to "show parents we care about their children. It's all about the children. That is why they are here, and that is why they have come."

In addition, the teachers repeatedly emphasized that building rapport is an important prerequisite to building positive relationships with diverse parents. The following teachers shared some of the strategies they use to establish good rapport with diverse parents:

> I am welcoming. I have an open door policy so parents always know that they are welcome in my class. Also, as Kindergarten teachers, we are at an advantage because we have the opportunity to see the parents quite often. Generally, however, be a very good listener. Listen to what they have to say to you and understand where they are coming from. You have to know that they are concerned about their children and they want the best for them. However, you have to listen to them. Come out of the classroom and ask them how it's going. This is a good time to touch base with parents and just see how things are going. It's not enough to just care about children. You have to let their parents know you care. Things are so new for these parents and they are so afraid. Letting them know you care about their children and about them makes it so much easier for them.

This teacher reported that even though she welcomes all parents into her classroom and listens very carefully to what the parents have to say, when the parents are not able to speak or understand much English, it is often difficult for her to comprehend what they are saying:

> Sometimes it's hard to understand what the parents are trying to say, especially if they don't speak much English. And while you want to get someone to help with the translation, because these parents are able to speak some English, you worry that you will offend them. So I find that I just have to be patient and listen closely to understand as much as I can. And what I have found works is that once the parents are done speaking, I will repeat the information back to them. I will speak slowly, carefully, and use a lot of gestures. There are days when I wish I could just say what I have to say, but I know how hard the parents are trying to get their message across to me so I have to remind myself to step back and let them talk. It takes time but I'm thankful that they are at least coming to me with their

> questions and concerns. This is much better than the alternative, where they are completely uninvolved and uninterested.

Similarly, another teacher shared that in order to build rapport with the parents that she works with, she will always make herself available at the door when she is picking up the children or dismissing them at the end of the day:

> I also talk to them at the door every day and if there is anything to share, I share it with them right then unless of course it is something private. But I am always at the door so that parents know I am accessible should they need to speak to me. They really like that. In this way, parents know I am available, and they become comfortable with me so that if there is ever a problem, we can address it right then and there. Also, if I am having problems with a child, I do not go running to the parents right away and tell them about this problem. I will usually try to address the issue in the classroom as much as I can, and if it escalates beyond a certain point, that is when I speak to the parents. So parents know that I work with their child and I try to resolve problems in the classroom so they are not nervous about speaking to me. They know I am there to help and that we are on the same side.

According to this teacher, not only is talking at the door a great way to build rapport with these parents but it also helps her get her message across to parents or grandparents who may not speak much English. This teacher mentioned that there are always parents around to translate and help her get her messages across, so as long as what she has to say is not confidential, she is able to get her message across relatively easily. The teacher noted:

> So it doesn't matter what kind of a day I'm having. I could be having the worst migraine, and it wouldn't matter. I have to put on my fake smile and get out there to greet the parents. So much rides on my attitude and on my smile.

Furthermore, the teachers explained that an important way they connect with diverse parents is by understanding and acknowledging their specific circumstances, and by sharing with them that teachers are willing to help them in any way possible.

According to this teacher, this facilitates relationships with diverse parents, ultimately leading to partnerships with them:

> Teachers have to be very open. They have to understand their community. They have to understand that the people making up their community are very, very concerned with their children and for a lot of them, this is the reason why they came to Canada. And teachers have to understand that the parents' situations are very difficult. There are mothers and fathers working nights. Also, you really have let parents know that you are there for them and their children. Have an open door policy so they can come to me at any time. Once they know that I am accessible and once they realize just how much I care about their children, I have seen that they become much more interested to talk to me about what they can do to help their children at home. They are also so much more likely to follow any advice or suggestions I give them. So it is so important to work to build a relationship with them. Without this, I don't think it would be possible to work in partnership with them.

When asked about how teachers can convey to parents that they are available for them, especially if the parents speak little or no English, 1 teacher shared the following comment:

> There are many ways I show the parents that I am there for them and I am available to help them. I get to know my parents really well so if I know they speak little or no English, I will always make sure that I have arranged for an interpreter when we are having formal conferences with them. If it's nothing formal, I will ask teachers on staff or even other parents to help me get my message to them. This way, they know that I will do what I can to make it possible for us to communicate and for them to talk to me. Also, I have a lemonade party in late-August. I host this party about a week before school starts, and I invite the parents and their kids so that the kids can meet me and other kids while still having their parents around. I start to establish rapport with the parents right at the lemonade party in August. And it's very low key, there are drinks and cookies, and I can go around and talk to all the parents and their kids. And I think often the parents watch the way you interact with their child and that kind of sets the tone. And I think it's important for them to know how I'm going to handle their child because then they're either relaxed or nervous and if I see they are nervous, then I can try and alleviate that. And at the party, there are many parents who speak some of the dominant languages in the community as well as English. So I ask them to help me get my message across to all parents. At this time, I talk to the parents about the need for them to continue using their home language with

> their children, the need for them to read to their children regularly, and the fact that I want them to work together with me to support the children's learning. I really emphasize to them that we need to work together and I encourage them to come to me with any questions they have at any time at all. If they are not comfortable with English, I tell them to bring someone who speaks English and who they are comfortable with when they come to see me. I also tell them that I can arrange for interpreters so if they don't know someone, it's no big deal.

Similarly, another teacher explained that when dealing with parents who speak very little English, it helps to get to know the demographics of the community and to learn some important phrases from the dominant languages spoken in the community:

> And another way you establish rapport with diverse parents it by trying to learn a few phrases from some of the languages that you know are spoken by families in the community. This really helps to ease the tension that parents may be feeling, especially if they struggle with the English language. I think if you pick up a few little phrases, it is very helpful.

In addition, although many of the teachers acknowledged the need to have an open-door policy to allow the parents to talk to them at any time, 1 teacher cautioned against such a policy. She explained that the boundaries of such a policy need to be clearly defined so that the parents understand that although teachers are accessible and are interested in talking to them, there are times when it is appropriate for parents to come in, and there are times when it is not:

> I think there has to be a fine line between being too open and just being open enough. Sometimes if a teacher is too open, I have seen that parents may feel that they can come into the classroom whenever they want to and interrupt the teacher. So there should be a line drawn. And I am thinking particularly of one teacher who is going through this right now. She is dealing with a parent who used to volunteer in her classroom but now walks into her classroom whenever she pleases and thinks that she can. So she feels that because she has volunteered in her classroom, she has the right to just walk in whenever she pleases.

According to the teachers, another important element required to solidify relationships with parents is to connect with them on a "human level." Rather than just

talk about the curriculum and restricting conversations to topics related to school, these teachers emphasized that parents get much closer to them when the teachers take an interest in knowing more about their family lives:

> And I also connect with them on a human level so that if a baby is born in the family, I will send home a card and a gift or if somebody passes away, I give them a card and some flowers. So I really try to connect with them on a human level and really get to know them well. And it really helps that I have been at this school for over 20 years so that I have taught most of their children. So they connect to me and they bring me food. They really are great. We work together.

Moreover, the teachers shared that they try to help the parents on a large number of settlement issues, which helps the parents understand that the teachers are truly there to help them and that working with them in partnership will benefit their children's learning:

> I also mentor them on issues outside of the classroom. So I often have parents who come to volunteer in my classroom to get some experience so they are to get admission into a university. And when they do, I remind them to make sure they get their driving licenses also because it is so important for them to learn how to drive. I also tell them where they can go to take English language classes so that they improve their chances of getting admission into the universities and of getting a job. I think it helps them to know we don't just care about their children, but that we also care about them. I think when they know this, they get so close to us and they know that we will help them in any way we can so that they can support their children's learning to the best of their abilities.

Another important aspect of building relationships with parents to establish and facilitate partnerships is to share information about the Kindergarten program with them. The teachers explained that they spend much time explaining aspects of the program to parents so that they know what to expect when their children are in school and feel prepared to support their children's learning:

> At our school, we have a Kindergarten orientation in June where we go over the Kindergarten program with the parents, and spend some time talking to them and answering any questions they may have. I believe this helps to relieve some anxieties they may have about their children starting school, especially if it is their first child. But also in September, I meet with all the parents for an interview where I ask them a barrage of questions, and I'm actually doing some now for kids who just started in my class, and that's another way where if they have questions or concerns, I am able to address them. And it's also a great chance to talk one-on-one with them. So I think the more you talk with them, the more they appreciate what you are trying to do for their child and so the more willing they are to help and participate.

Similarly, another teacher pointed out that these information sessions are very important because they give parents the facts they need to understand what the program is all about, and they also give teachers a great opportunity to emphasize the critical role parents play in children' learning. In many ways, these initial meetings with parents represent the start of these home-school partnerships:

> For some of the parents, this is the first child they have in school, so they are also on a learning curve, especially if they are new to the country and have not been through the education system here. I really feel that as teachers, we need to help them understand how to work with us and how to support their children's learning. And so for many of these parents, this is their first experience with school, and you are their first chance to know what school is all about. I also know the program very well, and I know what learning to read is all about, so I can tell the parents what they need to do with their kids. I have really seen that once they have the opportunity to realize how important they are to their kids' learning, they are happy to do what they can. We have to give them this information before we can expect them to work in partnership with us.
>
> At our school, we have a *Welcome to Kindergarten* night when the parents come to the school with their children to see the classroom and to meet the teachers and the administration. We give up bags to each child with books (numeracy, fiction, and non-fiction); a doodle pad; a pad of construction paper; magnetic letters and numbers; a jar of play dough; a pair of scissors; markers; and some information about the things parents can do with their children at home to help them get ready for Kindergarten. This has worked really well because the families get a real sense of what Kindergarten is all about and I know it really helps to ease some of their anxiety about starting school.

When asked about how the parents with limited English can partake in these orientation and information sessions, the teachers shared that they have settlement workers at their school who speak several languages that are spoken by many of the parents in the community. These settlement workers are invited to the orientation and information sessions to help with translations, and according to the teachers, having the settlement workers at these session is a great way to reassure parents that "there are other people at the school who look like them, who speak like them, and who understand their culture, religion, and where they are coming from." In addition, the teachers shared that they also strive to connect the parents of some of their students with the parents of children who are just starting out so that in the time it takes these new parents to get used to the teachers, they have someone to talk to:

> We try really hard to connect the parents of our JK [Junior Kindergarten] children to the parents of our SK [Senior Kindergarten] children so that the JK parents have someone they can talk to in their own language. I mean, it's always nice for these parents to be able to ask others about their experiences with the teachers. And I find that the SK parents are thrilled to be able to help us out in this way. While their English language skills may be limited, they are still able to help us by using their first language. It works out very well. So what we do is we invite parents who speak some of the dominant languages in this community to come to these orientation and information sessions and then we try to connect them to the new parents who speak the same first languages as them. I have also found that for parents who have recently moved to Canada, it's a great way to network and to meet new families.

Summary of Theme 1, Research Question 4:

- Successful teachers become familiar with parents' cultural practices and norms and learn about how these may affect or influence relationships with parents.
- Successful teachers attend events organized by the community to learn more about the cultures.
- Successful teachers are non-judgmental in their approach and build rapport with parents.

- Successful teachers connect with parents on a "human level" to reach out to the parents.
- Successful teachers learn common phrases from the major languages spoken by parents in the community.

Theme 2. Teachers need to give parents many opportunities to become involved in their children's learning.

In addition to emphasizing the absolute necessity for teachers to build positive relationships with parents before home-school partnerships can be established successfully, the teachers also explained that it is critical to give parents many opportunities to become involved in their children's learning. They explained that in addition to providing them with information on the kinds of things they can do with their children at home, other ways to get them involved include inviting them to volunteer in their children's classroom, supervise the children during field trips outside of the school, serve on the school's parent council, and participate in other school initiatives. The teachers noted that when parents have these opportunities, they are able to "see themselves as partners in their children's learning," and more importantly, they have the opportunity to actually observe and learn more about the kinds of things they can do to support their children's development of early reading skills at home. According to 1 teacher,

> I love inviting parents to help out in the classroom so I give them advance notice that we are doing a special activity in class and I invite them to come to help out for the last hour of the class. I really love to get them into the classroom and working with the children. I find that when they come to the classroom as volunteers, parents have the opportunity to observe the kind of activities their children are engaging in at school and they also get ideas about what they can be doing to support their children at home. Also, having these parents in my classroom makes it possible for every group of children to have an adult working

> with them. So there you are trying to run around between groups of children and now things are a lot calmer and a lot more engaging for the children because there are additional adults in the room. And I absolutely love that.

As this teacher explained, having parents volunteer in the classroom is a great way to support their classroom program while giving them opportunities to observe how the teacher interacts with children so that they are able to emulate this when they are working with their children at home. As 1 teacher emphasized, the time that parents spend volunteering in the classroom enables them to observe how teachers operate within the Canadian education system. Moreover, this teacher reported that it is important to take time to train parents so that when they are working with groups of children in the classroom, they are able to do so effectively. The teacher explained that this type of training is also extremely useful in helping parents learn about the kinds of ways that they can work with their own children at home:

> In my class, the parent volunteers read with the children one-on-one. I'd love to be able to read with all the kids but I just don't have the time to do it. So we have a session where I teach the parents how to read to the child, to sit on the side, and I teach them also the mechanics of reading. But mostly I spend time teaching them how read with a child, how to correct a child, how to make it a fun experience, how to do a picture walk, and really I focus on the rudiments of reading with a child. This way, they are comfortable working with the kids because, you know, they know what they are doing. And also, this type of training is great because they follow this at home when they are working with their kids. So this type of volunteering is really a win-win situation for all of us.

When asked about how she is able to work with and train parent volunteers who may not be proficient in English, this teacher explained that she provides them with dual-language books and encourages them to read to the children in their first language. According to this teacher,

> Many of our Kindergarteners love listening to stories in other languages. And it's fascinating to observe because even if they don't understand a word of what is read to them, they are still so engrossed. And it's all about helping the parents understand that we value their participation so when they come to volunteer, I ask them to work with the children in the best way that they can.

This teacher also explained that she organizes a conference with these parent volunteers and requests a teacher on staff, the settlement worker, or another parent she knows to sit down with her and help these parent volunteers learn how to use various reading strategies. In the event that the parents are reluctant or unable to use these reading strategies, she also ensures that they understand how to do a picture walk and how to work with the child to tell the story based on the pictures. This teacher emphasized:

> I want to make it possible for all the parents to volunteer irrespective of their abilities in English. I may have to do a bit of running around to arrange for someone to help me with the translating, but it's all well worth it in the end. There's nothing like empowering parents by showing them just how much they can do to help their children.

In addition, the teachers explained that when parents have opportunities to volunteer in their children's classrooms, they are able to work with their children's teachers extensively. As a result, the relationship between parents and teachers is really strengthened. These teachers explained:

> And of course when you have parents in the classroom, you get to know each other better so that also helps in building a strong relationship with them. And they really understand more about what you, as the teacher, are trying to teach their children and how much effort goes into that. Also, they develop a really good sense of what they need to do at home to support their children and also how their children are doing at school. So that is really helpful for them. So it is great education for the parents in every way and it really supported my teaching of the children in the classroom. So I had parents coming in to help out. In this way, they were able to come and help me out with the children, but they were also able to see the kind of learning that was happening in class and how to support this learning at home.

However, although all of the teachers shared that they strive to invite parents to volunteer in their classrooms, most of the teachers agreed that it is not possible for all parents to volunteer. This is especially true if the parents are working outside the home; have younger children at home; or feel inadequately prepared to volunteer as a result of, for example, their limited ability to communicate in English. Therefore, the teachers noted that for these parents, they plan other ways for them to become involved to help them realize that they also are making a contribution to their children's learning:

> And I also find it important to reach out to those parents who aren't able to help out in the classroom because of their work schedules or other factors. So what I do is I send home work for them to do at their own time at home like cutting things out for us and sewing up our stuffed animals that may have ripped. In this way, although they are not able to come to help out in the classroom, they still feel connected to what is happening. I always send home very simple things and parents love helping out. And this is also good for parents who are shy or parents who struggle with the English language. These are simple tasks that they enjoy doing and that are so very helpful to me. I also find that when they do these things, they are much less apprehensive about approaching me with their questions or concerns. I guess they understand that at their own level, they are making a contribution.

As this teacher noted, it is so important to help parents become involved in any capacity they can. The teachers conceded that when the parents realize how important they are to this partnership, and they realize their contributions are valuable, whatever the extent of these contributions, they are more likely to become and remain involved in their children's learning.

Similarly, another teacher also emphasized the need to reach out to parents and to invite them to become involved in any way they can. This teacher commented that she

invites the parents of her students by asking them to audiotape stories in their own language:

> We are reaching out to parents and inviting them to share their stories with the children. I tell parents what stories I'm telling at school and they can tell these stories to the children in their own language. Also, I invite the parents to share the stories they share with their children with me (either on CD or in person) and I tell this story to the children in the class or invite the parents to tell this story to the children. Listening to stories is a great way to develop children's vocabulary and oral language skills and I find that parents love to become involved in this way. I often have many parents come to our class and tell stories in their own language. It's lovely to see the children's faces light up, especially those who may speak the same language and the parent telling the story. The goal of doing this is to help the parents become involved in the children's learning in a fun way, but also to help the children see a connection between what they are hearing at school and what they are hearing at home.

When the teacher was asked about what she does when the parents may not be familiar with the stories she tells the children in class, she explained:

> It really isn't important whether the parents know the stories or not. I just tell them because I like to share everything with them. My goal is just to get them to tell their children stories and it really doesn't matter what these stories are. I want the children to develop their vocabulary so the more language they hear, the better and I have found stories are a great way to engage their little minds.

Although the teachers agreed that having parents volunteer is a wonderful learning opportunity for them, the teachers emphasized that the process needs to be simplified so that these opportunities are more accessible for parents. For example, 1 teacher explained that in order for the parents to have the clearance they need to volunteer, they need to apply to have a criminal record check completed, and this costs over $16. They explained that as a result of the cost involved and the time required for these checks to be completed, many parents are reluctant to approach teachers and sign up for volunteering opportunities:

> The criminal checks take a very long time, and parents have to pay $16 to get these done. For many of our newly arrived families, many single parents and on one income, this a great deal of money. But now that our school administration has waived the requirement for parents to pay the $16 to have the police check done, [it] has really made it easier for more parents to come out and volunteer. And I have certainly observed this during field trips where more parents are volunteering their time and coming on the trip with their children. I think the key is to just making things easier for parents as much as possible and encouraging them to become involved. We really have to invite them to come in to volunteer.

Similarly, with respect to making it easier for parents to volunteer, 1 teacher explained that

> And I invite parents who have younger kids to bring the younger kids to the classroom when they come to volunteer. And the mothers are usually very appreciative because they are able to bring their young kids with them. Without having this option, they really cannot come out since many of them don't have a place to take their kids during the time they are in the classroom.

In addition to giving parents opportunities to become involved through volunteering and simplifying this process as much as possible, the teachers also emphasized the need to invite the parents to come into their children's classroom frequently to observe their children in the context of the classroom:

> We also invite the parents of our Kindergarten children to come and observe the children in class a couple of times during the year. This gives them a real understanding of what the children are learning and also how they are learning. This also helps parents because they see how we are teaching the children and they will hopefully use some of these strategies at home. And so they come for an hour, and I always free myself up so I can talk with each of them.

The teachers shared that these observation visits present the parents with the opportunity to see their children in their learning environment, and they give the parents a chance to ask the teachers any questions they may have related to what they have observed.

Moreover, the teachers explained that these observations are also useful because they help the parents learn more about how to work with their children at home.

In addition to inviting parents to come for observation visits, the teachers also shared that another effective way to reach out to parents in order to help them become involved is to invite them to come to the class to share their knowledge with the children. For example, this teacher explained that

> I also invite them [parents] to contribute to the learning that happens in our classroom so if we are doing a unit on fairytales and if they have any books that they want to bring that are different versions of the tale that I will have read to the children, I invite them to do so. Or when we have a celebration in our class, I ask for input from the parents. I ask them to bring in food, music, books, clothing, or whatever they may have to help us with this celebration. So for every celebration, I send home information to the parents about what the celebration is and what the children will be learning and I always invite parents to share what they may have with us when it comes to these celebrations. And of course, when we do a unit on community helpers, I always invite them to come in and to talk to the children about their work and the jobs they do. I know many are not available in the daytime, but I invite them anyway and hope some of them can come out.

Another important way that the teachers reported helping parents remain involved in partnerships with them is that they are persistent in their approach and they take the time to follow up with parents who are not working with their children as much as the teachers believe they need to be. Although most of the teachers agreed that time is very limited and that finding the time to follow up with parents is challenging, they conceded that it is extremely important to do so because it shows the parents that the teachers really value their contribution to their children's learning. As this teacher noted,

> I phone the parents who I feel are not doing enough at home. I talk to them or I say you really need to be doing this. And I give them examples about the things their kids are doing at school and I give them examples of the kinds of things they need to be doing at home to help their child come along. And the reality is you

> will never get one-hundred percent participation from the parents, but you try. You try your best to get in touch with them and to encourage them to work with their children. I don't give up easily but sometimes it is hard. And I know there are a lot of things to do out there and I know it's hard. But I call them. I don't give up easily. And I also try to explain to them that learning is a priority and while I cannot make this a priority for all families, I try to show them what they can do. And it doesn't take a lot of time. You know you spend half an hour or fifteen minutes with a child every night and it will make a difference. And it really does show. It absolutely does. And I always call parents to let them know when I notice that they have been working with their kids at home. And they absolutely love to hear this.

Summary of Theme 2, Research Question 4:

- Successful teachers invite all parents, irrespective of their abilities in English, to volunteer in their children's classroom.
- Successful teachers train parents on how to work with all children in the classroom so they are less hesitant to become and remain involved.
- Successful teachers provide parents who are unable or unwilling to come to the classroom with other opportunities to become involved and to contribute to the classroom.
- Successful teachers invite parents to come to their children's classroom to share their knowledge with the children.
- Successful teachers invite parents to come to their children's classroom for observation visits to learn more about how to work with their children at home.
- Successful teachers take the time to follow up with parents who may not be working with their children as much as they need to be.

Research Question 5

In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers use home-school partnerships to support children's development of basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness?

According to the teachers, home-school partnerships with parents are instrumental in helping them ensure that children develop the early reading skills they will need to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1. The teachers explained that by

working in partnership with the parents, they are able to support the work that the parents do at home to facilitate their children's development of early reading skills.

During the in-depth interviews, the participants were asked a series of questions to explore their perceptions about how they use home-school partnerships to support children's development of basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness. The teachers' responses were clustered around two main themes. These themes are illustrated in Figure 5, and each theme is described in the section that follows.

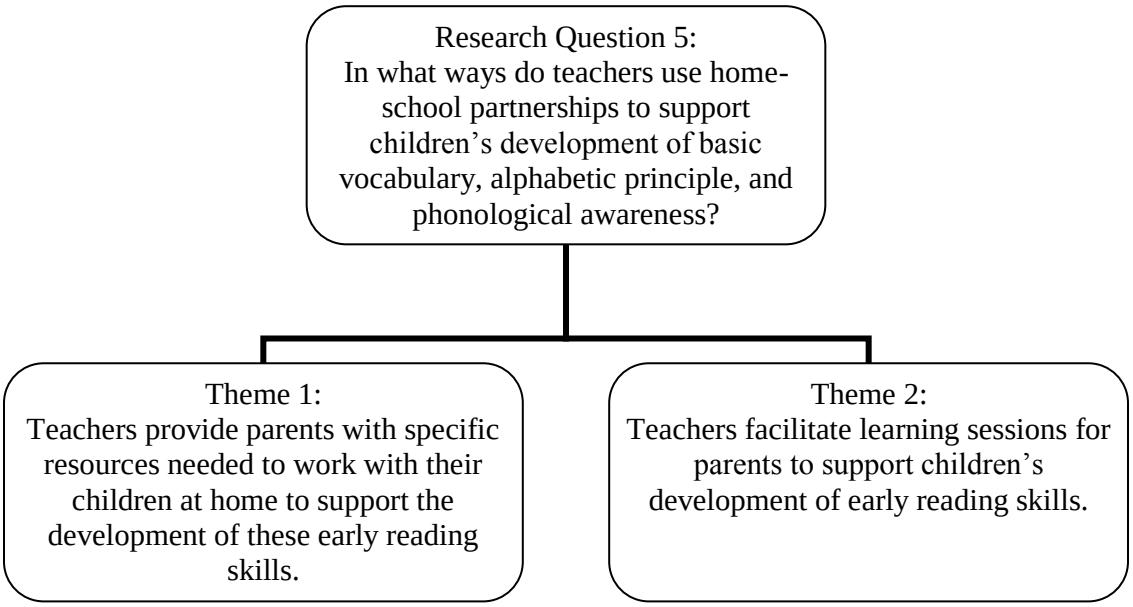

Figure 5. Diagram of themes for research question 5.

Theme 1. Teachers provide parents with specific resources needed to work with their children at home to support the development of these early reading skills.

According to the teachers, an important way to help parents support their children's development of early reading skills is to provide them with the resources they need to facilitate this learning. They explained that when the parents are working with

them in partnership, they collaborate with the teachers and communicate with them regularly so that the teachers really develop an understanding of the kind of support and resources that parents may need, and are then able to help parents support their children's learning in ways that best suit their specific circumstances.

For example, the teachers explained that the reality for many culturally and linguistically diverse parents, especially those who may be new immigrants, is that they are often doing shift work and have very little time to work with their children at home. The teachers emphasized that it is important to understand the parents' circumstances and to find ways that will enable these parents to support their children's learning. These teachers shared that the parents often do not realize the benefits of connecting children to other family members and services in the community who can work with their children. Therefore, they shared that they spend much time explaining this option to the parents:

> So for parents who work long hours, I continue to encourage them to do their best with their children. I also encourage them to have their children work with older siblings or older cousins and also to have them participate in programs at the local community center. The local library also has great programs for children so I encourage them to have their children participate in these programs as often as possible. And I also encourage them to connect to other people like aunts or grandmas or even their neighbors or community resources like the parks and recreation department and even tutoring services. I think as Kindergarten teachers, we really have to work hard to help parents understand that there is a lot they can do to support their children's learning. They might be busy, but there is lots they can do to get their children this support. We just have to take the initiative and find the time, as hard as that may be, to do this.
>
> I also think that it is important for me to tell parents about the resources in the community that they can use and take advantage of to support their children's learning. For example, when I was growing up, my mom was taking ESL classes and part of the program for her involved fieldtrips to Ontario Place and the farm and I got to see all of this. Otherwise my mom may not have thought of taking me to these places or even had the opportunity to do so. So it is important for parents to know what is available for them.

With respect to the development of basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness, the teachers conceded that they send home "simple, fun, and engaging work and activities" that the parents can do with their children that focus specifically on the consolidation of these early reading skills. They repeatedly emphasized that they do not expect the parents to teach their children any of these skills; rather, the purpose of sending work and activities home is to help parents support their children in consolidating these skills. The teachers noted that although the parents may know what their children are learning at school and are genuinely interested in supporting this learning, they often struggle trying to understand how they can work with their children to support this learning. Therefore, the teachers explained that the work they send home helps to focus and guide the parents in their efforts.

Based on the analyses of some examples of the type of work and activities that the teachers send home, the researcher observed that to help children learn the alphabetic principle (i.e., letters represent speech sounds) and to support their development of other skills related to phonological awareness, many of these teachers send home a "songbook" with rhyming poems and songs that the children are familiar with and which the parents or older siblings can use to work with children at home. According to 1 teacher, using poems and songs is a "great way to enable the children to hear the letter-sound connections and to help them identify words that have identical sound segments." This teacher also explained:

> When we send home these songbooks, we always make sure the children are familiar with the songs so there really isn't anything the parents have to do other than to practice reciting these with the children. And if the parents are unable to

> do so, it's really no big deal because all they really need to do is encourage the children to recite these. We never send home any poem or song until we have taught the children the words. And so, when we meet these parents early on in the school year, and also throughout the year, we make it clear to them that we just want them to do their best. We have our settlement worker, a parent volunteer, or another teacher on staff help our non-English speaking parents understand that in Kindergarten, we want to inspire the children and get them excited to learn how to read. And so we communicate to the parents that by simply encouraging children to share these songs or poems with them, the parents are doing so much to motivate them. And the children love singing these songs. It is a great way for them to just hear the sounds in these words. And we always send home songs that fit our theme. So if we are learning about the farm, we'll send home songs about farm animals.

In addition to these songbooks, the researcher observed that many of the teachers also send home simple games aimed at supporting, for example, children's alphabet identification skills and their basic knowledge of letter sounds or the alphabetic principle. Furthermore, although the teachers agreed that basic vocabulary acquisition is an important early reading skill, they reported that to help children develop their vocabulary, they encourage the parents to talk to their children and to read with their children, and if the parents' first language is not English, they encourage them to do so in their home language. Therefore, the researcher noticed that the work and activities that teachers send home focus more on supporting the children's development of specific aspects of phonological awareness, such as phonemic awareness.

Furthermore, the teachers shared that to support children's development of the skills related to phonological awareness, an important part of their balanced literacy approach is to use specialized instructional programs that focus specifically on these skills. They noted that these programs are useful for teaching children these concepts, and they explained that the work they send home is related directly to what the children learn

in class. They also emphasized that they do not have enough time in the teaching day to help every child practice what they have learned, so they depend on the parents to work with their children at home:

> I use the Jolly Phonics program to teach children the sounds. I have children need much practice to retain what they have learned, and I have seen that the children who know their jolly phonics sounds are the ones who practice at home. There just aren't enough hours at school for me to work with every single child at his or her level. I wish there was, but the reality is that there just isn't enough time. I have time to introduce each sound, to use it, and to spend some time practicing it. But the children who practice this at home are the ones who are reading now. So I send home games, books, and basic practice sheets for parents to use to help children internalize these sounds. I really count on them because I just don't have enough time. And the ones that work with their children, it really, really shows.

However, when asked about how they support the parents whose home languages may not include the phonemes present in English, this teacher explained that

> My goal in sending work home is to give parents an opportunity to work with the children to help them practice those skills that the children have already learned at school. By no means do I expect parents to teach these skills in their language or in English. It is exclusively my job to teach them, and my only goal in sending work home is so that parents have something tangible they can use to work with their children. For example, I often send home a game that focuses on phoneme identification, wherein the children have to take turns with their parents to read words and to identify which sound they hear in the beginning and end of each word. Again, the children are familiar with these words because I introduce them to these words at school and I practice these words with the children several times before I send them home so that these words are not new to the children. And I have found that for the parents who speak some English, this task is manageable and they ask for it. But if I know that a particular child lives with grandparents who speak no English, or if I know that the child recently moved to Canada and the parents speak no English, then I will not send this work home. I do not want to intimidate the parents. And so I will have to make up for this in class by spending more time practicing these skills with that child. And in situations like this, I find that our parent volunteers are great because they can sit down with these children and give them the one-on-one support they need to consolidate these skills.

Moreover, all the teachers emphasized the need to cater the homework they send home to the specific learning needs of the children, so that the homework addresses those skills that the children need to consolidate:

> My homework program took a lot of time to coordinate and organize, but I always tried to give children work that catered to their specific learning needs and individualizing the homework. So if a child really struggled with letter sounds, the homework activities would focus largely on phonics. If the child had a good grasp of phonics, I sent homework that focused on their vocabulary or reading comprehension.

In addition, the teachers emphasized the need to explain to these parents that the homework is a way for the children to practice what they have learned at school and that it does not have to be done in a way that is "neat and tidy." According to 1 teacher,

> Many [culturally and linguistically diverse parents] are used to having their children complete homework tasks neatly and perfectly because they come from a system where children are ranked by their teachers on how neat their work is. So much so that I have had parents doing the homework for the children because, as they explain, the 'children write messy'. So, for example, if I send home activities where the children have to practice printing the letters of their names, I always tell parents not to worry about whether or not the child's printing is neat or messy. I encourage them to help their children learn what these letters look like and sound like. I really have to tell them that I don't care whether this work is neat or not and that my concern is to help children learn these letters and their sounds. That is what is important. And some parents just don't get it, and that's what happens when you work in a community as diverse as this. It is hard for them to understand the way we do things here, so you just have to be willing to repeat yourself over and over again. But you have to be nice about it, and you have to understand that they are trying to understand, but everything is so new. It's not easy.

Furthermore, the following teachers explained that home-school partnerships are critical in enabling parents to work with their children at home to support their development of early reading skills because as these teachers noted, when parents and teachers work in partnership, they are so much more involved in their children's learning

and the teachers have many more opportunities to connect with them and to support the work they do with their children at home:

> It really boils down to having strong home-school partnerships with parents. I mean when they are working with me, they are so much more accessible to me and there is so much more that I can do to help them. But when parents are not working with me, it's so much harder and so much more formal. So when they work with me, I know they are interested and motivated. And so, when it comes to supporting children's phonological awareness and other skills related to phonics, I have actually given parents the whole jolly phonics program and shown them this is what I am using to teach the children at school and instructing them on how they can use this program at home to help their children. This helps the parents become familiar with the strategies that I use to teach their children in class that they can then implement at home.
>
> When parents work with me in partnership, I don't hesitate for a moment to call them or to invite them to come in. I know they are interested. But when parents distance themselves from me, it is hard. It really is. I try to do my best to create this partnership with all parents but it just doesn't happen. And for the parents who do work with me in partnership, it's really magical to see how their children learn. And at this age, children's brains are like sponges. They soak in so much. So I tell parents that we need to work together to ensure that children have all the basic skills they will need to become successful readers. And just to emphasize again, it's my passion to work with parents. We learn together and the children are at such an advantage.

However, in addition to sending home these learning activities that the parents can use to help their children consolidate these early reading skills, the teachers conceded that in their experience, engaging the children in reading activities at home presents them with many opportunities to learn new vocabulary and internalize the alphabetic principle and other skills related to phonological awareness. They emphasized that when the parents read to children regularly, whether in English or in their home language, the children are able to develop so many of the early reading skills they will need to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1. These teachers commented:

> A parent should be reading with the child on a daily basis. The children learn so many important pre-reading skills through reading. And anytime you expose children to letters or literacy or sing to them or read them a story or listen to records or go out and do things, really let the kids experience new things and new places, that is the key to learning.
>
> Reading to children is critical. They learn so much about the mechanics of reading through a simple read-aloud, not to mention the fact that their knowledge about the world around them increases, and they become more and more interested in reading. But I find that I really have to help parents with choosing books that are appropriate for their children. Often times, I find that parents go to the library and choose books that are much too difficult for their children. So I really explain the difference to them between the books that are appropriate for read-alouds, which are the books that they should read to their children to help them acquire new vocabulary and comprehension, versus the simple patterned readers that the children can begin to read independently by using their knowledge of phonics to decode the words.

When asked how she explains the process of choosing appropriate books for the parents who may speak little or no English, she explained:

> I am a very hands-on person, and I like to show parents what I mean more than talk to them. So when we sit down together, I'll pull out my examples of books that are appropriate for their children and I will show them examples of books that are inappropriate. If the parents speak no English, I'll have a translator help me out. If the parents speak some English, I find that I'm able to manage by showing them these examples of books. I will also give them a list of authors and I encourage them to take this list with them to the public library.

As these teachers explained, reading to children regularly is very important in helping children develop many reading skills. This was supported by the findings of several studies that have shown that books and interactive reading activities between parents and children strongly support children's reading achievement and that reading aloud to children is contended to be the most important activity that supports the development of their literacy skills (Bus et al., 1995, 2000; de Jong & Leseman, 2001; Sénéchal, 2006). Therefore, to enable the parents to read to their children regularly, the

teachers indicated that they have a book-bag program, wherein they send books home with the children on daily basis:

> I send books home four times a week, and I alternate the books I send home so that one day I'll send home a pattern book, and the next day, I'll send home a storybook. And I give parents guidelines about how to use each of these books with their child. Also, I alternate the books I send home because I think the storybook part is very important because I really believe the storybooks will help them with vocabulary, sequencing, story retelling, and other reading skills. The pattern books are also important because they will help children learn skills such as simple decoding, practicing letter-sound connections, and simple conventions of print. So I think both types of books are valuable, and by alternating these books, it assures me that they are getting a good mix and that they are working on different reading skills.

As this teacher explained, most teachers shared that they have similar book-bag programs, wherein they send a book home with each child daily. However, the teachers emphasized that when the parents are working with them in partnership, they return these books regularly. For others, it can be challenging to get the books back. These teachers commented:

> Perhaps the biggest difficulty I've experienced is around parents not sending the book bags back with the children so that they children can get a new book. This is the biggest issue that I have had to deal with. Most parents acknowledge that reading to their children daily is important and I always explain to parents that if their child borrows a book from school every day, from mid-September to the middle of June, that child will have had the opportunity to look at over 180 different books.
>
> When it comes to communicating about reading, I think the greatest challenge for me has been dealing with parents who just don't do enough to support their children's development of literacy skills. I know they care but it often seems like they don't. I mean you give them everything, you show them, you give them extra work to support their children at home but nothing gets done. I've lost so many books also because they never come back. I've lost folders of things. I can think of a number of parents who I managed to get to come in for an interview and managed to explain the critical need for them to work with their children at home. I also spent much time explaining and modeling the kinds of things they could be doing with their children at home and even giving them the

> resources they need. I remember breaking things down for them bit by bit but it still didn't help. Parents did not follow through as much as I would have liked them do. But I still keep going, hoping I will get through to them.

The teachers explained that it can be challenging to get every parent to participate in their home reading programs. However, the teachers conceded that it is critical to keep trying to reach the parents and to encourage them to become involved:

> You really don't know if the children who leave with books will actually read these books with their parents at home, but you hope for the best, and you hope that by providing them with strategies they can use and just guiding their efforts will enable them to work with their children at home in whatever capacity they can.

Although the teachers have programs that enable the parents to read to their children on a regular basis, several teachers explained that as the result of the parents' inability to read in English, they are unable to read the books that are sent home with the children. For these families, the teachers shared that they send home dual-language books, wherein the words in the books are in English and in the child's home language. The teachers explained that this makes reading to the children possible for all parents, irrespective of their abilities in English:

> Some of the things I do is that I actually have *star books*, which are essentially simple books that I make dual language. I had some grandparents who wanted to read to their grandchildren but they couldn't read in English, so I had some people on staff translate the English into languages that they could read. Staff translated for the grandparents. Now I have these little books that they are able to use to read to the children, and I really strongly, strongly believe that they have to continue with their first language. Just because they cannot read in English does not mean that they cannot help their children learn these early reading skills. Reading is reading, and it does not matter what language they use. But it becomes important to give them these books in languages that they can read.
>
> And for parents who really struggle with the English language, we send home books in dual languages so that they are able to read to their child in their own language. By having them in, we usually have an idea of which parents will

> benefit from dual-language books. And as a Kindergarten team, we really have spent a lot of money investing in these dual-language books, and it has been a great investment since we have been able to reach so many more parents as a result.

These teachers explained that dual-language books are extremely useful in enabling all parents to read with their children at home. Therefore, several teachers conceded that teachers working in diverse classrooms should have a library of these books in all the languages that are dominant in the community. Nevertheless, these teachers emphasized that simply having these books in the classroom is not enough and that teachers need to

> Sit down with the parents and find out about the language that is spoken at home. It is also important to find out if these parents are literate in their home language because these books will be no good to them if they are not. And in the case that they are not, we can send home wordless books and have a translator help us train the parents on how to do a picture walk with their children. There is so much that the parents can do but teachers really need to take the time to understand what parents' needs are.

Furthermore, the teachers emphasized that in addition to providing the parents with resources such as books and homework to support the work they do with their children at home, it is also important to remind the parents regularly about their role in their children's development of reading proficiency. One teacher noted:

> And I also believe that parents are children's role models and I always tell parents that they should show their kids that they are also interested in reading and that they should really read in front of their children, whether it is in English or in the home language. I tell them that I don't have the opportunity to model for the children as much as I'd like to in school, but that they should really demonstrate their interest in reading for their children. So when children see their parents reading on a pleasure basis, the children become motivated to read also.

However, the teachers emphasized that it is critical to continue to acknowledge the parents' efforts and to help them understand that they play a very important role in

supporting their children's learning. Therefore, the teachers explained the need to respect what the parents do at home and that if there are concerns, to address these concerns in a manner that is respectful and useful for the parents. This teacher explained:

> When I notice that a parent is using an inappropriate reading approach with their child, I never tell them that what they are doing is wrong. They are not wrong; they are just different. In their mind, this is the right way to teach their children. I would say to the parents that "your idea is great, but what about doing it this way." I sometimes say to them to forget about the words and focus on the pictures. I tell them to talk about what's going on in the pictures. I encourage them to talk to their children about the books, and I encourage them to keep talking to the children to get interested in the books and I tell them to just speak to their children in their first language. I tell them to "read the pictures" and to tell them lots of stories." This is how they will learn to read.

In addition to sending books home so that the parents may engage in reading activities with their children, the teachers shared that they connect parents to the local public library, making it more accessible to them:

> I connect with our local library and arrange for the children's librarian to come in. She talks to the children about getting a library card and provides them with a form they can take home and their parents can fill out. She explains to them all that they can borrow from the library with this card. I hope that by connecting them to the library, they read more.

Summary of Theme 1, Research Question 5:

- Successful teachers take the time to understand parents' circumstances and connect them to resources in the community that can work with their children to help them consolidate the skills they are learning at school.
- Successful teachers send home simple, engaging activities for parents to use to help their children consolidate the early reading skills learned at school.
- Successful teachers take the time to understand children's specific learning needs and they send home work that addresses these needs.
- Successful teachers send home leveled readers as part of their book-bag program so parents can engage in reading activities with their children on a daily basis.
- Successful teachers send home dual-language books so that all parents, irrespective of their abilities in English, can read to their children.

Theme 2. Teachers facilitate learning sessions for parents to support children's development of early reading skills.

The teachers conceded that the parents need to be instructed on strategies to use when working with their children on reading skills at home, as well as on how to use these strategies effectively. Therefore, the teachers explained that when working with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, it is not enough to simply present them with a list of strategies or examples of strategies to use to support their children's reading development: Many will not know what to do with them. Moreover, before working with the parents on these reading strategies, the teachers asserted that it is critically important that they ensure that the parents understand what the teachers define as "reading with children." The teachers shared that in many cultures and depending on how the parents were educated, the definition of "reading with children" can be very different:

> And what's interesting is that we've found that the concept of reading to your child is not the same across all cultures. So when you say "reading with your child," in our minds, we picture parents sitting in bed with the child making animal noises and talking about the pictures. But for many parents, this is not what reading means. So I've discovered that in some cultures, reading with your child could mean the parent reading something and the child sitting across the room looking at a book. So again, that whole concept isn't universal, and it comes down to making the implicit explicit. We have to explain to parents what we mean when we say reading to or with your child. Before we can begin to help them with strategies that they can use, we need to make sure they understand what we mean by reading with children.

As this teacher explained, it becomes very important to ensure that the parents understand what we mean when we are asking them to read with their children because, as 1 teacher

shared, what might seem basic and universal to teachers may not be true for parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Although the teachers conceded that sharing best practices and effective reading strategies with parents helps to support the development of their children's early reading skills, the teachers emphasized the fact that they have to give the parents opportunities to learn about how to use these strategies effectively. These teachers commented:

> I really find that parents struggle with how to read with their children at home and what to do to help them strengthen their skills. This is especially true for our diverse parents who are new to our country and new to the system of education here. So at parent-teacher interviews, I spend a lot of time with parents explaining the kind of things they can do with their children at home. For example, this year, all the parents who came to the interview walked away with a couple of activities they can do related to these early reading skills. For example, one of these activities consisted of a little bag with bottle caps on it and each bottle cap had one letter of the child's name on it. So I explained to the parents that at home, they can use these caps with their children to sequence the letters of their name correctly, and to practice the sounds associated with each of the letters in their name. And for the more advanced children, I demonstrated how they can use their letter-sound knowledge to phonetically spell other words by using the letters in their name. So I actually ended up giving this to each family before they left the interview and I explained how to use this activity at home. The idea was to give parents strategies about how to consolidate some of these reading skills, but also to demonstrate how to use these strategies effectively. I find that it's not enough to just give parents ideas. We actually have to show them how to implement these ideas.

Similarly, these teachers shared that the following:

> We use our *curriculum day* to educate parents about effective strategies to use when working with their children at home. We used to have curriculum night, but we found that very few parents came out to the curriculum night and the curriculum day worked much better. So what happens is that early in the fall, the children will come to school with their parents and we will model for the parents what we do during our group time, what we do during our carpet routines, and we read a story for the children. So this is a great way for parents to get ideas about what they can be doing with their children at home when they are, for example, reading stories with their children. We talk a little bit our program and the

curriculum, but our focus is really on sharing effective strategies for parents to use when working with their children at home, in addition to physically demonstrating how to use these strategies at home.

And at our school, we have many workshops where we invite the parents to come and learn about things they can be doing with their child. One example is the workshop we do for our borrow-a-book program, also called our reading session. At our school, we do not just begin to send books home with children, because we really believe that we need to make sure the parents know how to use these books at home so that their children are able to benefit from these reading sessions with their parents. So sometime in November, before we begin our borrow-a-book program, we invite parents to come in. Normally, we have two or three Kindergarten classes doing this together. So the children come in and we ask the parents to wait outside for a few minutes….We then invite the parents to come in and we do a 20 to 25 minute workshop with them. In very simple English, we explain to them various aspects of our program like when the books go home, when they need to be returned, and other logistical details of the program. Next, we model to the parents about how to actually read with their children. We talk about things like following the print with their fingers, we tell the parents to read the book to the child first and then work with their children on looking for high frequency words. We explain to them how to do it and things to focus on. And at the end of the session, we give them a very, very simple handout that walks them through how to engage in a book reading session with their child. This handout has a picture with just three or four words attached to the picture. It is very simple for the parents to follow and gives them the information they need to guide them when they work on reading activities with their children at home. We also have this translated in several languages. We organize a meeting during the day with parents and our settlement worker is involved. The focus for this meeting is on "success for Kindergarten" and we have found that many parents do attend. We run this meeting in the morning and in the afternoon, and we offer babysitting for younger siblings that the parents may need to bring. And we talk about the independence of eating, toileting, and about the expectations we have of the children in Kindergarten, and some of the playground rules. And we talk a little about how we teach writing and we introduce the concept of phonics to them and that we encourage children to use their knowledge of letter-sounds to read and write simple words. We talk about the importance or reading to children and that if the parents are not able to read in English, then it is fine to read in their home language or tell them stories in their own language. And we also talk about resources available to them in the community, like the public library. I mean we really try to share those kinds of things with them and we answer questions. And we usually do this in October so it's early on during the school year. And we also have our settlement worker involved who speaks a variety of languages so if there is need to translate, she is often happy to do so. We also send a letter home before the meeting to ask parents if they will need translators so we can arrange for them.

As these teachers highlighted, it becomes very important to work with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to assist them in understanding the strategies to use as well as how to use them effectively when working with their children at home. The teachers agreed that the parents' ability to work with their children greatly depends on their own education and their level of comfort with respect to using various reading strategies. Therefore, the teachers explained that by physically demonstrating how to use these strategies for the parents, the parents are able to observe how to use these strategies. In this way, the teachers hope that the parents will be more inclined to use these strategies at home. However, the teachers repeatedly emphasized that to run these sessions successfully, it is important to ensure that interpreters are available so that all parents have access to this information. One teacher explained:

> We arrange for our settlement worker or an interpreter from the school board to be present at these sessions so that they can translate the information for the parents and so that parents can ask us questions. But we have found that when we arrange these sessions, if parents struggle with English, they often bring someone they know to translate for them. I think they are more comfortable this way. But still we always have people available at the sessions to help with the translations. I mean what would be the point to run these sessions if all parents cannot benefit from them. It takes us so much time to get ready for these sessions so we really like to make sure we reach as many parents as possible.

When asked about the turnout at these sessions, the teachers agreed that word of mouth is a good way for the parents to learn about these sessions:

> Initially, it is hard to get them to come out but we have found that when they hear about these sessions from their friends, neighbors, or relatives, and they know that there will be translators available and that the information is important for them, they start to trickle in. And we advertise heavily. We start letting parents know about these sessions much in advance of the day of they take place. This helps them to organize their schedules if they need to. And of course we send this

> information home in a number of different languages. I have also found that during the JK [Junior Kindergarten] year, the parents are more reluctant to come out. But as they get to know me and know what these sessions are all about, by the SK [Senior Kindergarten] year, many more come out.

In addition, the teachers shared that although these sessions take much time to organize, the feedback they get from the parents is very positive, emphasizing that the parents are "thrilled to be learning from us" and that they "feel so much more empowered when they know how to work with their children. It's exhilarating for us to hear that." Similarly, the following teachers shared that

> Oh, there were so many good moments that come out of doing these kinds of learning session for parents. I particularly remember one incident where I had a father come up to me and explain that the session completely changed his way of thinking about reading with his son. He shared with me that every evening just before bedtime, his son would come up to him [the father] and ask him [the father] to read to him. However, the father decided not to read to his son because he didn't really know what to do and he also felt that his son was only asking this because he wanted to stay up later. But he shared that ever since the our reading session, he reads to his son every night. That was amazing for me to hear. And in addition to helping them with strategies that they can use to promote their children's learning during these reading sessions, we also told them about making reading a fun activity when they can bond with their child. And we really emphasized to the parents that make this reading time fun for the children so they actually want to do it. Make it a bonding time for you and your child and something you both look forward to.
>
> And during our curriculum nights and literacy nights at school, I actually demonstrate for parents how to implement reading strategies at home. So now I am hearing more from parents that they are reading books with their children and I am getting less and less questions such as "why isn't my child reading yet?" So I think parents really understand where their children need to be and what they can be doing to support their learning. I think I've been clear with parents and that's really helping them.

All of the teachers agreed that these sessions are extremely helpful in giving the parents the opportunity to learn how to engage their children in reading and other learning activities at home. The teachers shared that although many parents from diverse

backgrounds may often feel intimidated about working with their children at home, these learning sessions enable them to observe that there is so much they can do at home to support their children's learning. To enable parents to follow these strategies at home, teachers give them a very simple handout to supplement these learning sessions (see Appendix I). As 1 teacher noted, "We only need to show them how much they can do and the ways they can work with their children at home. Once they have this information, they don't hesitate for a moment to become partners in their children's learning."

Even though the teachers conceded that these learning sessions are extremely useful in facilitating strong partnerships with parents and empowering them to work with their children at home, many of the teachers consistently emphasized that the time to arrange these sessions is a big challenge, explaining that "we just don't have enough time in our day. There is only so much we can do." Therefore, 1 teacher explained that she incorporates this type of a learning session for parents into her teaching day:

> I used to have Reading Thursdays, which was just the last half hour of every Thursday in the month of May. What I did was I invited parents to come in, and it was like a drop in so they could come in half an hour before the end of the day. And so, we would just be doing reading at this time. So if a child's parent came, the child and the parent would read together. For the children whose parents weren't able to come, those children continued to read with a partner on the carpet. And while parents were reading with their children, I would listen in and give suggestions. I would always point out what they were doing well and then give them next steps on what to do at home. This really worked for me because it was really informal, and it wasn't really a workshop or presentation. I find that workshops or presentations don't work well for all parents and I much prefer sitting down one-on-one with them and modeling different strategies for them to use at home with their child. So these Thursday sessions were informal and non-threatening, and I found that they gave parents a real opportunity to see what they can do at home and to ask any questions that they may have. It also is great because they see that we both have a shared goal and that is to help their child learn to read. I really enjoy that.

As this teacher mentioned, another way to help parents is to incorporate these types of learning sessions into the school day. Similarly, another teacher shared that she uses her time during parent-teacher conferences to help parents develop appropriate strategies to use when working with their children at home:

> I think parents need to support children's development of reading, writing, and oral skills and I find that the best way for parents to do this is through a book. A book will do so many things so I go through the books and show the parents how to talk about the pictures and I talk them through what I need to see from the children and what I need the parents to do at home. Many of these concepts are so foreign to parents so I model how to use a book to practice these skills. So I spend a lot of my time during parent-teacher interviews helping the parents learn about how to practice these skills with their children at home. And I really find it so useful to have these one-on-one sessions with parents, where they are free to ask questions. So my interview time with the parents not only focuses on the child's progress in school, but I spend a lot of time talking about what the parents should be doing at home.

When asked about how parents who may be illiterate in their first language can support their children's learning, the teachers agreed that even illiterate parents can promote the acquisition of reading skills by motivating their children, providing an environment that promotes the acquisition of literacy skills, asking their children to read to them, and encouraging verbal interaction about written material. However, the teachers repeatedly emphasized that it is critical for them to continue to learn about the children, their families, and the kind of learning that happens at home so that if these children are not receiving support at home, the teachers can arrange to provide more of this support at school.

Finally, the teachers explained that home visits would be a great way to support the work parents do with their children at home on these early reading skills. As 1 teacher

explained, although home visits are no longer a part of the Kindergarten program in Toronto, he emphasized the need to include these visits into the existing program:

> I also think home visits are important and we should go back to doing them. These would require the Kindergarten teachers to visit the children in their homes sometime in the summer and this is so beneficial because it gives the teacher great insights about the child's home life. It also gives teachers an opportunity to observe the child, to talk to the parents in detail about how to set up their home environment so that it is more conducive to learning, and to share strategies with them, even through modeling, about the things they can do at home to support their children's learning. I remember sitting down with a family from Tibet and, since the parents spoke very little English, working with the older siblings and showing them how to read to the child. This family was quite involved in the child's learning and so I really believe that these home visits make a big difference. It also makes the relationship between the teacher and the family so much more personal and I like that.

Summary of Theme 2, Research Question 5:

- Successful teachers understand that simply presenting diverse parents with a list of strategies to use is not sufficient.
- Successful teachers educate parents on how to use these strategies effectively. They ensure that there are interpreters or other adults available so that all parents can benefit.
- Successful teachers are willing to spend time outside of the instructional day to plan and organize these training sessions for parents.

Summary

This chapter was organized into four main sections, and it presented the process that was used to gather, generate, record, and analyze the data, in addition to the outcomes of the data analysis. There was a discussion on the data collection process, the quality of the data collected from this study, and the methods used to analyze the data. Also included was a description of the systems used for data management and reflection. The findings were presented in a manner that addressed each of the research questions that guided this study. Chapter 5 presents an analysis and interpretation of the findings, a

discussion of the implications of the findings, practical applications of study findings, recommendations for future research, and implications for social change.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary and interpretations of the study findings, along with implications and recommendations for educators, administrators, school board officials, and researchers. The chapter begins with an overview of why the study was conducted, how the study was done, a review of the questions that were addressed, and a brief summary of the findings. This is followed by a discussion of the interpretations and conclusions of the findings, and an explanation how these findings relate to the larger body of literature on this topic, including the conceptual framework. Next, the implications for social change are addressed, followed by recommendations for action and future research. The chapter ends with the researcher's reflections on the experience of doing this grounded theory study, and how her thinking changed after conducting this study.

Overview

Canada is changing dramatically in terms of diversity, and Toronto is representative of this diversity. Termed the "city of many cultures and languages," Toronto is home to virtually all of the world's culture groups, where more than 100 languages and dialects are spoken. This diversity of race, culture, and languages sets this city apart from other world cities ("Diversity in Toronto," 2008). Moreover, this diversity is reflected in its schools, and the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is known to be among the most diverse school boards in North America.

As a result of this increasing diversity, it has become more important for teachers to understand how to embrace diversity and how to be inclusive in their approach so that all students, irrespective of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds, are empowered with the education they need to become successful, contributing members of society. An important element of this inclusive approach to education is to provide all parents with opportunities to work in partnership with teachers and to become involved in their children's learning. Decades of research have highlighted the instrumental role that parent involvement plays in children's academic success. Models have been developed to help teachers facilitate home-school partnerships to support children's learning (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 1995).

However, to date, very few studies have focused on how to establish and facilitate these home-school partnerships in Kindergarten with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to support their children's development of early reading skills. Moreover, the models that do exist in the literature are general overviews and are not applicable for teachers who work with diverse parents. Therefore, the impetus for this grounded theory study was to fill this gap in the literature by exploring how successful Kindergarten teachers, working with diverse parents, establish and facilitate these partnerships to support children's development of early reading skills. An additional goal was to use the data rendered by this study to develop a model that Kindergarten teachers can use to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse parents in the context of their own teaching situations.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do successful Kindergarten teachers define home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?
2. According to these Kindergarten teachers, in what ways do home-school partnerships support children's development of early reading skills?
3. What are some strategies that these Kindergarten teachers use to communicate with parents on a regular basis?
4. In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers reach out to parents to establish and facilitate partnerships with them?
5. In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers use home-school partnerships to support children's development of basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness?

The participants in this study included 12 Kindergarten teachers from the TDSB. These teachers were selected using purposive sampling techniques, and several approaches were used to recruit the participants for this study to ensure that the best informants were found. In addition, the data for the study were rendered using qualitative, in-depth, semistructured interviews, as well as document analysis. The data analysis process was ongoing and commenced as soon as the first interview was transcribed. To ensure that the findings were grounded in the data collected, specific data analysis procedures were used

(Glaser, 1978). In addition to the coding procedures, this analysis also involved using the constant comparison method and memo writing.

Summary of Findings

The interview transcripts and documents collected from the teachers were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. These data were read thoroughly and repeatedly, and codes were assigned to words, sentences, paragraphs, and sections in the transcripts and documents. During the process of analyzing and coding the data, the researcher simultaneously engaged in memo writing, wherein she documented her thoughts and ideas about emerging and recurring themes. Once all the data had been analyzed, the researcher merged the codes into categories and assigned themes to the research questions. A summary of the findings of this study, represented by the themes that emerged from the data analysis, are presented in Table 1. This table is a synopsis of the detailed discussion of the findings presented in the previous chapter.

Table 1

Research Questions and Themes

Research Questions	Themes
Research Question 1 How do successful Kindergarten teachers define home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?	• Teachers and parents play specific roles in a home-school partnership. • Collaboration between teachers and parents is central to a home-school partnership. • Regular, ongoing communication is central to a home-school partnership.
Research Question 2 According to these Kindergarten teachers, in what ways do home-school partnerships support children's development of early reading skills?	• Teachers encourage use of home language to promote development of English language skills. • Teachers provide parents with the support they need to work with children at home.
Research Question 3 What are some strategies that these Kindergarten teachers use to communicate with parents on a	• Regular communication is through newsletters and formal and informal meetings with parents. • Specific strategies are used for communication

regular basis?	with non-English speaking parents.
Research Question 4 In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers reach out to parents to establish and facilitate partnerships with them?	• Teachers need to build relationships with parents. Table 1 cont'd • Teachers need to give parents many opportunities to become involved in their children's learning.
Research Question 5 In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers use home-school partnerships to support children's development of basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness?	• Teachers provide parents with specific resources needed to work with their children at home. • Teachers facilitate learning sessions for parents to support children's development of early reading skills.

Conclusions and Interpretations of Findings

This study drew on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory as it relates to children's development of early reading skills. The principle tenets of this theory are that language mediates learning and that children acquire mental processes and new skills by engaging in guided interactions with adults. According to this theory, it is only after these shared, interactive experiences with adults that children begin to internalize these mental processes and skills and use them independently. Therefore, it can be surmised that parent-child communication and the work that parents do with their children at home are very important prerequisites in helping children internalize all of the new processes and skills learned at school. Further, this theory was used as the conceptual framework because it explicitly highlights the imperative for all parents to work with their children at home.

Stemming from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory is the notion of the zone of proximal development, or ZPD, which Vygotsky defined as the distance between what a learner can achieve independently and what is achievable with adequate support or scaffolding. He further asserted that a child's new capacities can only be developed in

this ZPD and that this process is facilitated when a child engages in collaborative and interactive learning activities with an adult or more capable peer. Moreover, Vygotsky purported that it is with much assisted practice that children are able to internalize the new skills they learn and include them as part of their psychology and personal problem-solving repertoire. It is only after this is achieved that these skills enter the child's zone of actual development, enabling the child to successfully apply and extend this knowledge to other learning situations. Therefore, it is critical for teachers to work in partnership with all parents to provide children with experiences that are in their ZPD to encourage and advance children's learning of these early reading skills, and to enable them to internalize these skills so that they may begin the process of learning how to read.

As Vygotsky (1978) explained, the teachers in this study also conceded that children are only able to internalize the early reading skills they learn at school if they have many opportunities to consolidate these skills at home with their parents. Therefore, the teachers repeatedly emphasized the necessity to work in partnership with parents to provide them with the tools they need to support their children's learning at home and to help them consolidate the early reading skills that they will need to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1. This need to work in partnership with parents was supported by Webster and Feiler (1998), who noted that early literacy is a socially constructed phenomenon intercalated with children's day-to-day routines of family life.

Therefore, using Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory as the conceptual framework and the data collected from this study, the researcher developed a model for Kindergarten teachers. The purpose of this model is to enable Kindergarten teachers to

create and sustain partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to build their capacity and to empower them to work with their children at home. Moreover, this model serves as an application of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory because it will enable teachers to establish and facilitate partnerships in their own teaching contexts to ensure that parents have the support they need to scaffold their children's learning at home in order to help them consolidate the early reading skills that they learned at school.

The following section presents the interpretations of the findings for each research question. These interpretations contain references to outcomes in chapter 4, cover all the data, are bounded by the evidence collected, and are related to a larger body of literature on the topic. This section is followed by a description of the grounded theory model.

Research Question 1

How do successful Kindergarten teachers define home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?

According to Vygotsky (1978), young children need to have many opportunities to practice the skills that they have learned in order to master them and to independently apply these skills in future learning situations. As a result, with respect to early reading skills, teachers and parents must work together in partnership to assure that children are given a myriad of opportunities to practice or consolidate these skills so that they are able to apply these skills in order to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1. Although teachers need to instruct children on these early reading skills, parents need to act as scaffolds to enable children to internalize these skills. According to Vygotsky,

scaffolds can be the environment the parent creates, the instructional support the parent provides, or the processes and language that are lent to children in the context of approaching a task and developing the abilities to meet it.

In defining home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the teachers conceded that collaboration is an essential feature of them. They explained that although they strive to work with individual children during the school day, it is not possible for them to address all their learning needs. Thus, they depend on the work that parents do with their children at home to support and enhance their learning. This need for collaboration in home-school partnerships was supported by Christenson and Sheridan (2001), who explained that "the common denominator across all models and actions of effective home-school partnerships is the establishment of a 'collaborative ethic' as an attitudinal framework for home-school relationships" (p. 95). These researchers also asserted that "to be true partners, school and family interactions must embrace collaboration as a central mode of operating" (p. 95). More importantly, Epstein (2001) reported that a collaborative relationship improves parental self-image, which then facilitates a good working relationship between parents and teachers.

Christenson (1995a) asserted that "home-school collaboration requires recognition by all involved that educational outcomes are influenced by events in the home, by events in school, and by the continuity between home and school environments" (p. 254). As Christenson explained, the teachers also agreed that before they can work in partnership with the parents, it is important for them to work with the parents to ensure that they both share the same goals and visions to guide and facilitate

children's learning. The teachers emphasized that if their goals differ from the parents' goals, it becomes important for them to work together to ensure that they are able to find a common goal or, as one teacher shared, a "middle ground" that can sustain these partnerships. This is critically important, and as Musti-Rao and Cartledge (2004) reported, children who are aware of the collaborative relationship between their parents and their teachers are able to understand that both their parents and teachers care about their education; as a result, these children are more likely to do their best academically.

Regarding the development of early reading skills, the teachers explained that collaboration enables them to work with parents to help them "pick up where I [the teacher] left off" and to provide them with invaluable opportunities to work with their children to consolidate the skills learned at school. Lily and Green (2004) explained:

> Diversity in families contributes to rich literary experiences and exchanges between home and school when teachers and families work together, collaboratively. Children's literacy development blossoms most readily if teachers and the adults in their primary settings have consonant goals. Successful literacy partnerships are based on incorporating the multiple literacies that surround children at home, considering adult caregivers as partners in literacy, and providing a variety of family opportunities for inclusion in literacy. (p. 118)

Therefore, given that learning occurs across many settings and contexts, and that children spend more time out of school than they do in school, the teachers emphasized that maximizing the extent to which these systems work together on behalf of the children can close the achievement gap for all children, irrespective of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

In addition to collaboration, the teachers also emphasized that regular, ongoing communication is important to sustaining these partnerships. They shared that this two-

way communication between the home and school improves the way parents and educators work toward the goal of helping children develop early reading skills because it gives parents many opportunities to track their children's progress while also keeping in touch with the teacher. This was supported by Epstein (2001), who explained that teachers should strive to create two-way communication channels from school to home and from home to school so that families can easily keep in touch with teachers. It also would enable families to be aware of school programs and student progress in varied, clear, and productive ways. McCarthey (2000) reported that a key component of a successful home-school relationship appears to be the sharing of information, noting that communication needs to be clear, consistent, and positive, and that parents need to believe that they play an important role in their children's learning. Similarly, Bridgemohan, van Wyk, and van Staden (2006) reported that "close contact and regular communication between the home and the school in Early Childhood programs improves the way parents and educators work towards the goal of child development" (p. 60).

To sustain this communication, however, the teachers emphasized that although it is important to let parents know about any problems that their children may be having at school, it is more important to focus on the positive as much as possible. They reported that parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds tend to be very sensitive and are easily overwhelmed and discouraged when teachers share negative information with them. This was supported by Epstein (1995), who explained that although there are many benefits associated with frequent communication between the school and the home, parents often are frustrated in situations where the communication always relates to

problems concerning their children. In these situations, they begin to distance themselves from the school.

The teachers also explained that communicating with parents regularly enables them to learn more about the parents and their children. This was supported by Padak and Rasinski (2006), who reported that just as more information about the schools allows parents to assist their children better, the more information teachers have about the children's home environment, the better equipped they will be to accommodate the needs of the parents and the children. Sumsion (1999) contended that

> In effective partnerships, parents and teachers educate each other during open two-way communication. Each point of view enlightens the other. Mutually responsive relationships seem more likely to flourish if such programs focus more on the interconnectedness of parents and teachers through their mutual commitment to children and on exploring ways to enhance and celebrate this connectedness. (p. 11)

Finally, the teachers explained that in home-school partnerships, both the teachers and the parents play very specific roles so that although teachers and parents are working together collaboratively, they each have very explicit roles in these partnerships. However, teachers emphasized that while they have many roles in these partnerships, perhaps their greatest role is that of educating the parents about the education system in Canada, about the importance of engaging their children in developmentally appropriate learning activities, and about their critical role in their children's learning. The teachers explained that in these culturally and linguistically diverse communities, many of the parents are used to a very different system of education; therefore, for them to work with

their children at home effectively, they need to be educated about the system here and the expectations that teachers have of the children and of the parents.

Moreover, although the teachers agreed that they are responsible for instructing the children and introducing them to new skills, they emphasized that they need the parents to work with their children at home to help them consolidate and strengthen these skills. The teachers repeatedly explained that their role in these partnerships is to help parents understand the need for these partnerships, explaining that educating children is a shared responsibility and that education is not restricted to the classroom. This was supported by Esler et al. (2002), who explained that home-school partnerships can be defined as "establishing and maintaining productive, working relationships between families and schools to facilitate children's learning . . . and the knowledge that children's academic and social growth occurs across multiple settings" (p. 389).

In addition, Clabaugh (2000) explained that images of schooling and education are socially constructed, so parents who have been raised in a different system of education may find that their views differ significantly from those of the teachers and administrators. Therefore, teachers need to take the time to help parents understand the school system in Canada and to explicitly explain their roles in these partnerships. According to Christenson and Sheridan (2001),

> Families can and do play different roles in supporting their children's learning. School personnel increase the probability of family involvement when they value each role and help parents see the importance or benefit of different roles for their children. (pp. 53-54)

Although this may be challenging for teachers, Musti-Rao and Cartledge (2004) emphasized the need to embrace this challenge and to initiate these partnerships with all parents because home-school partnerships are "a strong, combined force of accountability in education, ensuring that children receive and benefit from an effective education" (p. 21).

Research Question 2

According to these Kindergarten teachers, in what ways do home-school partnerships support children's development of early reading skills?

An important aspect of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory is the notion that children's environments or their social contexts greatly influence how and what they learn. Therefore, their ability to internalize the skills that they will have learned at school depends very much on the extent to which they engage in scaffolded learning activities and interactions with adults in various social milieus, including home and school. According to Bodrova and Leong (2007), the "social context molds cognitive processes and is part of the developmental process" (p. 10). As a result, in addition to the school environment, the home environment also influences children's learning.

As the teachers in this study explained, when they establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with parents from diverse backgrounds successfully, they are able to work with the parents to empower them with the support they need to scaffold their children's learning. According to these teachers, by working together in partnership, teachers and parents are able to help children move along their respective zones of

proximal development in order to internalize the critical early reading skills that they will need to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1.

In addition, understanding how the home environment can influence children's development of early reading skills is increasingly becoming an area of interest for educators and researchers. This is largely the result of the observation that children who successfully acquire early reading skills tend to remain good readers, whereas the children who struggle early on with learning to read tend to continue to have difficulty with reading throughout their school years (Adams, 1990; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Children need to acquire early reading skills so that they can begin the process of learning how to read and become proficient readers. This assertion was supported by the teachers in this study, who explained that by working in partnership with parents, they are able to help them support their children's development of these early reading skills. The teachers consistently referred to the parents as their greatest resource, explaining that even though it is solely their responsibility to teach the children these skills, they depend on the parents to work with their children at home to help them consolidate these skills, emphasizing that there is not enough time in the school day to address every child's specific learning needs.

The teachers explained that an important way they work with culturally and linguistically diverse parents in partnerships to support children's devleopment of early reading skills is to encourage them to use their home language to facilitate the children's learning. According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, language facilitates the shared experiences and interactions between children and their parents necessary for

building cognitive processes. Vygotsky asserted that language is an actual mechanism for thinking. Bodrova and Leong (2007) explained that language is "one of the processes through which external experience is converted into internal understandings…language allows the child to imagine, manipulate, create new ideas, and share those ideas with others" (p. 14). Vygotsky asserted that by acquiring language skills, children are able to use these skills for intrapersonal (socialization) and interpersonal (thinking) purposes and that these skillswill facilitate the processes involved in learning a second language.

In addition, the teachers reported that parents from diverse backgrounds, especially those who may be new immigrants to the country, are anxious about their children's abilities in English and worry about how their children will do in school if they are not fluent in English. The teachers explained that the parents feel tremendous pressure to give up their first language and to start using English with their children at home. Therefore, the teachers commented that they work with the parents to help them understand the importance of using their home language to support the children's development of English langauge skills, explaining to the parents that if the children are fluent in their first langauge, the language skills that they have learned will help them to learn English langauge skills faster and more efficiently.

This notion was supported by Cummins (1991), who reported that both literate and conversational skills in the children's home language are significantly related to the development of literate and conversational skills in their second language. Cummins further recommended that "rather than trying to expedite the disappearance of the child's home language, educators should actively explore with parents ways in which the

developmental process that underlies growth in both languages can be enhanced" (p. 95). Wong-Fillmore (1991) asserted that if teachers and parents focus exclusively on English, the loss of the home language will occur rapidly, potentially destroying family cohesion.

In addition to Cummins (1991), Gottardo (2002) also reported that for English language learners, oral langauge proficiency and phonological awareness in their first language can predict successful literacy acquisition in both their first and second language. What is more encouraging is that the phonological awareness skills developed in one language transfer to another language, even while those skills are still in the process of being developed in the first language (Cisero & Royer, 1995). Atwill, Blanchard, and Gorin (2007) investigated the influence of language proficiency on the cross-language transfer of phonemic awareness in Spanish-speaking Kindergarten children when they started to learn English upon entry into Kindergarten. They assessed the children's Spanish and English receptive vocabulary and phonemic awareness, and the results of their analyses indicated that there was a cross-language transfer of phonemic awareness skills.

Moreover, Cisero and Royer (1995) reported that children who are learning English as a second language are able to take advantage of higher order vocabulary skills that they developed in their first language, such as the ability to provide formal definitions and interpret metaphors. Studies that have compared bilingual instruction with English-only instruction have demonstrated that children learning English as a second language who are simultaneously instructed in their home language perform better, on average, on measures of English reading proficiency than children who are instructed

exclusively in English (Bialystok, 1991). Similarly, Atwill et al. (2007) reported that critical literacy skills developed in the first language will transfer to the second language, enabling children to learn the second language much faster and much more efficiently. Therefore, parental support in the home language plays a critical role as children learn a new language.

The findings of these studies were a strong indication of the need for teachers to continue to encourage parents to use their home language to work with their children at home. As the teachers in this study explained, in addition to the many ways the first language will facilitate the children's learning of English language skills, they also emphasized that it is far better for parents to use their home language than to use what the teachers called "broken English" to work with their children. Yang (2006) reported that young children have a natural ability to learn multiple languages and need opportunities to interact socially in different cultural settings to promote language development. According to this findings, it is the most beneficial for children to continue to use their home language with their parents and to focus on their English language skills at school.

In addition to encouraging parents to use their home language to help their children develop early reading and other literacy skills, the teachers also explained that they provide parents with the support they need to work with their children at home. The teachers shared that in working with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they have realized that these parents may have been raised in very different education systems and may be unfamiliar with our education system here and of how to engage children in developmentally appropriate learning activities. This support is critical

because according to Epstein (1986), although the vast majority of parents want their children to be successful in school, many do not know how to assist their children in ways that can improve and enhance their school performance. Moreover, the teachers emphasized that they remind parents that they are their children's role models and that their behaviors and attitudes related to reading can be a great influence on their children. This was supported by Neuman and Roskos (1998), who explained that parents can act as powerful models for their children when they engage in such activities as reading the newspaper, writing shopping lists, and talking about the importance of reading and writing.

According to the Report of the Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2003), teachers must work with parents to help them understand that children learn to read in a series of developmental stages that lead over time to independent reading. It is incumbent upon teachers to help all parents, irrespective of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds, to understand the characteristics of the beginning reader, the emergent reader, the early reader, and the fluent reader. In addition, teachers must support parents by describing the most appropriate home activities at each stage in a child's reading development. Finally, parental activities that afford children opportunities to learn are important in their acquisition of reading skills (Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2004).

Research Question 3

What are some strategies that these Kindergarten teachers use to communicate with parents on a regular basis?

An important tenet of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory is that children must engage in guided learning interactions and activities that give them many opportunities to practice the new skills that they have learned so that they can internalize and master these skills and then use them independently. However, the teachers reported that when working with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they must remember that the parents come from very different systems of education and that for many of the parents, English is not their first language. Therefore, the teachers explained that many of these parents do not understand how to work with their children at home, emphasizing that they must explicitly provide the parents with appropriate strategies. In order to do so, the teachers reported the need to communicate with the parents regularly and, as a result of the language barrier, the need to use several different strategies to reach these parents.

According to Lee (2006), an important part of parental involvement in children's education is "ongoing communication between the home and school that improves parents' communication with their children, as well as with teachers and school officials" (p. 18). Similarly, Christenson and Sheridan (2001) explained that "open, two-way communication is another important element of an atmosphere that is conducive for effective home-school partnerships" (p. 116). This was supported by Epstein (2001), who also highlighted the need to create two-way communication channels from school to home and from home to school so that families can easily keep in touch with teachers and other school staff. These assertions were echoed by the teachers in this study, who repeatedly emphasized that open, two-way, and regular communication with parents from

diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds is an important way for them to facilitate home-school partnerships. Although language barriers pose challenges to this type of communication, the teachers explained that they use many strategies to overcome these barriers. They send monthly newsletters home, have formal and informal meetings with parents, send e-mails, and call parents to discuss anything that may have come up during the school day or to touch base with parents whom they may not have seen for some time.

According to Padak and Rasinski (2006), using different strategies to communicate is important in reaching all of the parents. The teachers also emphasized that the goal of using several methods to communicate with the parents is to ensure that the parents have regular access to information about what their children are learning at school and about the kinds of things they need to work on with their children at home. The teachers shared their observation that when the parents are aware of what their children are learning at school, they feel more connected to the school, they feel as if they are much more involved in their children's learning, and they become much more empowered and much more willing to work with their children at home. These observations were supported by Christenson and Sheridan (2001), who noted that "for meaningful connections to occur, families need information on the 'what, why, how, and when' they can be involved" (p. 203).

The teachers acknowledged the critical need to communicate with parents regularly, but they also emphasized that language barriers often are an inevitable impediment to this type of communication. The teachers explained that although they send out newsletters and other written information frequently, and although they ensure

that the information on these newsletters is presented in a consistent manner through the use of simple English that is free of teacher jargon, they have observed that not all parents can comprehend this information. Therefore, the teachers explained that they send home translations of letters to ensure that the parents, who themselves may be English language learners, are able to understand the information. This need to send home translations is supported by Kirmani (2007), who reported that "although it may difficult to find human translators, computer-based translations are accessible, and teachers can send notes and invitations home in several languages" (p. 98).

The teachers emphasized that in order to maintain bidirectional and open communication between the home and school, they always include sections in their newsletters that remind the parents to approach them with any questions, comments, or concerns. This need for the parents to be involved in the communication process was supported by Christenson and Sheridan (2001), who explained that

> To be truly open and bidirectional, however, it is also incumbent upon parents to take responsibility for maintaining communication; that is, just as schools and school personnel have a responsibility to reach out to parents, parent have a responsibility to communicate and participate with school personnel. (p. 93)

In addition to sending home translations, the teachers identified many other strategies to overcome the language barrier, including the use of gestures and visuals when communicating with parents in person. They also emphasized that in working with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they prefer face-to-face communication so that they can ensure that the parents understand the messages that the teachers are trying to convey to them. They also shared that if communication with

parents is only possible through interpreters, they make arrangements to have these interpreters available when meetings with the parents. However, the teachers explained that because it takes so much time to arrange for interpreters through the school board, they rely on other staff members to help them with these translations, noting that the parents often prefer to have teachers or other staff members assist them with translations rather than someone officially sent from the school board. This need to communicate with parents in their home language and on a regular basis was supported by Ensle (1992):

> Communication should continue, if necessary, in the native language of the parents by teachers, aides, and administrators. When needed, translators should be readily available. Continuous communication should then be initiated and sustained via telephone calls, personal invitations, written notes, and newsletters. (p. 141)

Research Question 4

In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers reach out to parents to establish and facilitate partnerships with them?

When parents are involved in their children's education, there are significant benefits for students, educators, and families (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2001). According to the teachers, in order to enable parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to become involved in their children's learning, it is essential to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with them. The teachers explained that these partnerships make it possible for them to work collaboratively with parents to set realistic, shared goals to guide their children's learning, and to provide them with the support that they need to ensure that their children are able to develop the critical early

reading skills they will need to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the need for children to have many opportunities to consolidate the skills that they are learning so that they can master these skills and apply them to all other learning tasks without additional support.

According to Dyson (2001), one of the most important underlying principles in teaching reading is to acknowledge children's social, cultural, and linguistic resources. Dyson explained that parents play a key role in tapping these resources, emphasizing that teachers need to understand how to create and sustain successful partnerships with parents to support the growing population of children who are English language learners (ELLs) and newcomers to our schools. In line with Dyson's assertions, the teachers also conceded that partnerships are important in supporting children's learning. However, they emphasized that before any kind of a partnership can be created with parents from diverse backgrounds, they must strive to build positive relationships with parents that acknowledge the important role of parents in their children's learning and that they value and respect parents' concerns, comments, and opinions. It is important for teachers to continually emphasize to the parents that they care about the children. For example, Matuszyn, Banda, and Coleman (2007) reported:

> For people in many cultures, relationships with others are especially important. Parents from such cultures are much more likely to collaborate with individuals whom they believe are genuinely interested in their children and in the well-being of their children, than with professionals whom they perceive are "just doing their job. (p. 26)

Furthermore, the teachers explained that to build positive and productive relationships with parents, it becomes very important for them to understand the parents'

culture and to accommodate their teaching practices to reflect these cultural values, norms, and practices. Walqui (2000) supported the need for teachers to learn about the background, culture, personal histories, and parents' educational experiences, explaining that this type of understanding can serve as a "point of departure" for including parents in a partnership to support children's learning. Similarly, Broussard (2003) emphasized that teachers "need to understand the importance of and be prepared to involve all types of families in the education process. To do this, teachers must learn about diverse family styles and cultural backgrounds and realize that all families have strengths" (p. 215). The teachers explained that they often attend cultural and social events hosted by the school community to reach out to the parents and to understand more about their cultures and traditions. This was supported by Matuszyn et al. (2007), who commented that "professionals can facilitate a sense of caring by becoming involved in some of the activities of the minority community (such as attending community festivals, neighborhood center activities, etc.)" (p. 25).

Lopez (2001) emphasized the need for teachers to consider parents' cultural values and beliefs and for them to realize and acknowledge the fact that the definition of "parent involvement" and "education" may be very different for these parents. Holman (1997) emphasized that teachers should be welcoming in their approach when working with these parents and that they should strive to build warm, positive relationships with them before they try to create and sustain partnerships with them. According to Holman, this can help teachers alleviate the "intimidation factor" that may be preventing many parents from diverse backgrounds from entering into partnerships with teachers (p. 37).

The teachers also explained that initiating relationships with parents requires them to be open, welcoming, and nonjudgmental. They emphasized the need to connect with the parents on a "human level" and to help them understand that the teachers want the best for their children and that they are driven by the goal of working with the parents to support and enhance their children's learning. This was supported by Matuszyn et al. (2007), who explained that "the process of getting to know each other on a personal level may also aid in diminishing the 'lack of trust' issue that often exists between people from diverse backgrounds and those from the dominant culture" (p. 25).

In addition to building relationships with parents, the teachers explained that another important strategy they use to establish partnerships with parents is to give them many opportunities to become involved in their children's learning. They agreed that providing them with the support they need to work with their children at home is important, but they emphasized that there need to be many more opportunities for parents to become involved in their children's learning. In addition to inviting parents to volunteer in their children's classrooms, the teachers also invite the parents to come in for observation visits. For parents who are unable to or unwilling to come to the school, the teachers provide other ways for them to become involved. The teachers conceded that these types of opportunities are beneficial in establishing partnerships with the parents and in empowering and motivating them to work with their children. This was supported by Gestwicki (2000), who explained that "the learning experiences teachers can offer children in the classroom can he multiplied and enhanced by parents who feel invited and included in the educational process" (p. 138). Gestwicki also noted that when parents are

included in their children's learning and are given many opportunities to become involved, they are "right on board" and are happy to do what they can to support their children's learning.

According to the Report of the Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario (OME, 2003), giving parents and other family members from diverse cultural and linguistic background the opportunity to volunteer in the classroom can provide valuable support for the classroom reading program. These individuals can read aloud to children, help them with homework, and practice sight words, and tasks involving letter recognition. For children whose home language is not the language of instruction, parent volunteers who speak the same language can help to ease the transition into school. In addition, these individuals can assist teachers in providing support for children who may not be receiving adequate reading support at home.

Although the teachers agreed that it is important to give parents many opportunities to become involved in their children's learning, they emphasized that it is equally important for teachers to have an open mind and to realize that there are many other ways that parents can support their children's learning that extend outside of their own opinions of the activities and behaviors that constitute parent involvement. For example, according to Lareau (2000), institutional notions about family involvement are often exceedingly narrow and usually confined to attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering in the classroom, raising funds for the school, and helping with homework. Parents' views of family involvement, especially if they are from diverse backgrounds, may be much broader. This was supported by Lopez (2001), who reported that first-

generation immigrant parents often participate in their children's education in ways that differ from traditional forms of school involvement. As an example, he presented the case of the Padilla family, who were farmers and who participated in their children's education by having their children observe and experience the hardship of physical labor in farming, thereby modeling the importance of education to them.

Studies that have focused on Latino families have revealed that many Latino parents believe that they are making great contributions to their children's learning and consider themselves to be involved in this learning by teaching their children strong morals, respect, and good behavior (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). If teachers do not take the time to understand and to acknowledge the different ways that parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds define involvement, parents may feel frustrated, and they may develop negative perceptions toward their children's teachers and school, eventually resulting in decreased school involvement.

Research Question 5

In what ways do these Kindergarten teachers use home-school partnerships to support children's development of basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness?

Early reading skills, including basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness, are necessary for learning to read successfully (Adams, 1990; Hart & Risley, 1995). Together, these skills build the foundation for reading. The earlier these foundational skills are acquired, the more efficiently and effectively additional

skills can be learned. The ability to read proficiently in English is essential to achievement in every academic subject and to the educational and economic opportunities beyond schooling. According to Cairney (2002), "Children live in a world of diverse opportunities for learning, in which literacy is an important vehicle for this to occur" (p. 153). Therefore, as Sénéchal (2006) purported, it is critical for teachers in Kindergarten to work in partnership with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to ensure that their children acquire the early reading skills that will enable them to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1 and to become proficient, motivated readers.

An important way to help parents support their children's development of the aforementioned early reading skills is to provide them with the resources to facilitate this learning process. The teachers emphasized that although it is their responsibility to explicitly teach children these early reading skills, they depend on the parents to work with their children at home to help them consolidate the skills that they have learned at school. They explained that they provide parents with the support and resources that they need to work with their children at home. For example, to support children's development of phonemic awareness, an important aspect of phonological awareness, they use specific instructional programs in the classroom that focus on these skills and they provide parents with follow-up activities that help children to consolidate these skills. Examples of these follow-up activities that teachers send home to support children's learning in this area include games that focus on these skills; activities that are related to the program of instruction that the teachers use to instruct the children in the

classroom (i.e., Jolly Phonics); and songbooks that give children an opportunity to hear the sounds in words.

These activities that support children's development of phonemic awareness are very important to their ability to learn how to read, especially if they are learning English as a second language. For example, many studies have established the critical role of phonemic awareness in the development of beginning reading proficiency (Manyak, 2008; Stuart, 1999, 2004). These researchers have found that phonemic awareness contributes centrally to children's acquisition of the alphabetic principle, which is the understanding that the letters of the alphabet represent phonemes in speech. This understanding makes early phonics instruction useful for children and facilitates children's ability to blend letter sounds while decoding words, to learn sight words reliably, and to spell phonetically.

With respect to ELLs, Stuart (1999) conducted a longitudinal study that investigated the effectiveness of phoneme awareness and phonics teaching as an introduction to reading. The children in the study were inner-city children whose mean age at the start of the study was 5 years and 1 month (i.e., typical age of Senior Kindergarten students in Ontario, Canada). Eighty-six percent of the sample comprised children learning English as a second language. Children were assigned to one of two intervention groups, namely, a phoneme awareness and phonics group and a Big Books group. The children in the phoneme awareness and phonics group received 12 weeks of daily intensive, structured phoneme awareness and phonics teaching using the Jolly Phonics program, which is the program that the teachers in this study reported using to

teach children the skills related to phonological awareness. The children in the Big Books group received 12 weeks of daily instruction using a more holistic approach. According to the results of a posttest conducted 18 months after the end of the intervention, the children in the phoneme awareness and phonics group achieved significantly higher scores than the children in the Big Book group on tests of initial phoneme identification, phoneme segmentation, letter-sound recognition and recall, and word reading.

To extend the findings of this study, Stuart (2004) conducted a follow-up study 30 months after the initial intervention to investigate any long-term advantages of this phonics training on children's development of reading skills. The results provided further evidence that early structured phonics teaching using specialized instructional programs, such as the Jolly Phonics program used by many of the Kindergarten teachers in this study, can have long-lasting effects on subsequent literacy skills. For example, the children who received this phonics training continued, 30 months after the intervention, to have better scores on a number of different skills related to phonological awareness, including phoneme segmentation, grapheme-phoneme correspondence knowledge, single word reading, and spelling. Therefore, the findings suggested that children who are learning English as a second language benefit greatly from instructional programs that focus on the skills related to phonological awareness. Although teachers should continue to teach children using these programs, they also should send home simple activities related to these programs that parents can use with their children. As the teachers in this study shared, although they may have to train parents how to use these activities to use

with their children at home, this home learning gives children many opportunities to consolidate the skills they have learned at school.

To focus on the skills related to letter identification and the alphabetic principle, the teachers explained that they send home many games that are engaging for the children and that are simple for these diverse parents to use. Such games that focus on letter identification tasks are very beneficial because, as indicated by the findings of a study by Scarborough (1998), the best predictor of future reading success is the child's current level of skill with printed letters and words. Scarborough noted that for preliterate children, a measure of letter naming by itself accounts for an average of 35% of the variance in later reading.

With respect to the development of vocabulary skills, Pinker (1997) explained that for most English-speaking children in Kindergarten, typically between the ages of 3 and 5, vocabulary acquisition continues to grow at a rapid pace. By age 5, children will have learned between 3,000 and 8,000 words. An average 6-year-old child has acquired over 13,000 words (Pinker), and although studies have shown that reading to bilingual children learning English as a second language can help them to develop their vocabulary (Collins, 2005), the aforementioned information about children's vocabulary acquisition does not apply to children learning English as a second language. Pinker purported that most children of this age enjoy listening to stories, talking about stories, identifying familiar signs and labels, and participating in rhyming games, and that they are beginning to understand that print carries specific messages. Pinker emphasized that this is the best age to focus on helping children acquire new vocabulary.

Bredekamp (1987) explained that this type of linguistic awareness is best developed within the context of the child's work and play; as a result, children's environments should provide many opportunities to hear and play with language. This finding was consistent with the teachers' responses that they always encourage parents to have conversations with their children and engage them in activities that enable them to use language and to build their vocabulary. The teachers reported that the parents often do not understand the importance of having two-way conversations that give children many opportunities to share their thoughts with their parents. According to these teachers, many parents from diverse backgrounds "just like to talk to their children rather than talk with them."

The teachers described the many ways they support parents to help their children consolidate these specific early reading skills (i.e., basic vocabulary, alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness). Most of them explained that they have home learning programs that help parents to focus on these skills. Research has indicated that parental interaction during the completion of homework is an important factor in improving parental involvement (Epstein, 2001; McCarthey, 2000). This homework also gives parents many opportunities to scaffold and guide their children's learning in order to help them master and internalize the skills learned at school (Vygotsky, 1978).

The teachers emphasized that before sending any work home with the children, it is important to spend much time planning this work. This was supported by DeVries (1997), who explained that although homework should facilitate interactions between parents and their children, teachers need to consider how to facilitate children's

construction of knowledge during the interactions and avoid parent domination of the homework process. DeVries asserted that effective homework models should revolve around the social constructivist theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), which operates under the premise that learners must be allowed to actively construct their own knowledge while working with an adult or more knowledgeable peer.

The teachers also explained that in planning these home learning programs, they have to be cognizant of any constraints that parents may face and that the parents will understand how to use whatever is sent home to support their children's learning. This was supported by Olympia, Sheridan, and Jenson (1994), who emphasized that creating effective homework and home learning opportunities requires careful attention to the goals and constraints that exist in the home and school environments. The teachers explained that they carefully plan the work they send home, and to ensure that this work is helpful for parents, they often ask for feedback from them. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) emphasized that soliciting this type of feedback from parents not only ensures that their needs are being met but it also helps them to realize that teachers genuinely care about their children and want the best for them. Fagella (1990) reported that teachers must also be cognizant of the backgrounds of parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and ask for their input when constructing homework assignments, emphasizing that when diverse parents are asked for their feedback, they feel valued and show more interest in interacting with their children.

In addition to homework, the teachers also send home books with the children every night, explaining that engaging in these reading activities with their parents is the

best way for children to develop a number of literacy and early reading skills. This assertion was supported by researchers who have indicated that joint book reading motivates children to read and supports the development of their early reading skills (Bus et al., 1995, 2000; de Jong & Leseman, 2001; Sénéchal, 2006). With respect to children learning English as a second language, Kalia (2007) reported that book reading activities in the home support bilingual children's development of many early literacy skills including, for example, the bilingual children's oral language and literacy development in their second language.

Collins (2005) conducted a study with 70 preschoolers who spoke Portuguese and who were leaning English as a second language. These children were exposed to a pair of stories three times a week for 3 weeks. During these reading sessions, rich descriptions of specific vocabulary words that appeared in these stories were shared with the children. According to Collins, these rich descriptions consisted of pointing to the pictures, providing a brief definition of the word, using a synonym, using an action to show the meaning of the word, and using the word in a new sentence. The results of the study, based on the Picture Peabody Vocabulary Test-III, indicated that this type of reading activity led to significant gains in the children's vocabulary acquisition. Most importantly, however, Collins reported that this type of vocabulary instruction also was beneficial for ELLs, who have very limited knowledge of the English language and who are just beginning to learn the English language. Nevertheless, L. A. Meyer, Wardrop, Stahl, and Linn (1994) reported that merely reading books aloud is not sufficient for accelerating children's oral vocabulary development and listening comprehension.

Instead, the way books are shared with children matters. Therefore, as the teachers in this study explained, it becomes very important for Kindergarten teachers to take the time to instruct parents from diverse backgrounds on how to read with their children effectively.

The teachers stated that for children learning English as a second language and for their parents, who themselves may not speak much English, they often send home dual-language books so that the parents are able to read these books to their children easily. Research has confirmed that when young children learning English as a second language are learning how to read, they are more motivated to engage in reading activities when they see their language affirmed and reflected in books (Dickinson & Hinton, 2008).

The teachers explained that it is very important to select the books that are sent home very carefully and that these books should include a combination of simple books that the children can read independently as well as more difficult books that require adult support. This was explained by Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the ZPD. For example, texts that are simple enough for children to read independently are those that are in their zone of actual development, so the children do not need any support from adults to read them. However, the texts that are at their instructional level are those that the children can read with some assistance and through which they will learn new reading skills and strategies. Therefore, it is important for teachers to carefully choose the books that they send home so that children have opportunities to reinforce and consolidate the skills they have already learned and that that they can also begin to develop other reading skills and strategies.

Although the teachers agreed that homework and reading programs are beneficial in guiding parents as they work with their children, they repeatedly emphasized that simply sending these home is not enough, explaining that parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds often do not know how to, for example, read with children effectively. According to Manyak (2008), the support that teachers provide to parents enables them to offer children multiple opportunities to develop and solidify the critical skills they need to begin learning how to read. Therefore, the teachers explained that it is very important for them to plan and implement learning or training sessions for parents wherein the teachers model how to work with the children at home. The learning sessions are essential because they give parents an opportunity to "see" how to engage their children in learning activities at home. This was supported by Callahan, Rademacher, and Hildreth (1998), who reported that providing ongoing training and support for parents is crucial because many of them come from very different systems of teaching and learning. They need consistent opportunities to participate in training sessions that include demonstrations and opportunities for discussion and questions. In addition, their findings indicated that when parents attend such training sessions, their children's academic performance increases. Paratore (2001) asserted that the existing cultural discontinuity between teachers and parents can be addressed by the teacher shifting from "telling to showing" parents what to do and by "explicitly teaching parents to assume new roles" (p. 85).

Grounded Theory Model

According to Epstein (1995), parent involvement at home, parent involvement at school, and parent involvement at home and school all have a positive impact on student outcomes. This study focused specifically on parent involvement at home, and the purpose was to explore Kindergarten teachers' perceptions and experiences related to establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to support children's development of early reading skills. Because many traditional family involvement practices are considered ineffective with families from diverse backgrounds (Esler et al., 2002; Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002), the researcher was interested in exploring how these teachers reach out to diverse parents to work with them in partnership to support their children's learning.

Moreover, in the researcher's experience as a Kindergarten teacher, she has observed that although many teachers may acknowledge that collaboration and communication are important requisites for home-school partnerships with all parents, they do not always understand how to collaborate and communicate effectively with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As one teacher explained, "I find that some or our newer teachers just freeze when the traditional approaches of communicating don't work with them and it really is hard…I think it takes education and experience to develop this understanding."

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher created the grounded theory model presented below (see Figure 6) for Kindergarten teachers to use to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with diverse parents to support their children's

development of early reading skills. This model was created to help Kindergarten teachers understand how to create and sustain home-school partnerships in their own teaching contexts. Its development was based on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which supports the need for parents to work with their children, scaffold their learning, and help them internalize new skills that they are learning. This model may make it possible to apply Vygotsky's theory by enabling teachers to establish and facilitate partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and to work closely with them to support their children's development of the early reading skills they will need to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1.

As shown in the grounded theory model, the theory or deep-seated theme that emerged from the data analysis is the conviction that before Kindergarten teachers can begin to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they must be committed to embracing diversity and adopting appropriate attitudes and practices that enable parents to become involved in their children's learning. In order to adopt these attitudes and practices, teachers need training and experience to understand how to work effectively with parents from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, as this model shows, there are very specific ways for teachers to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to support children's development of early reading skills.

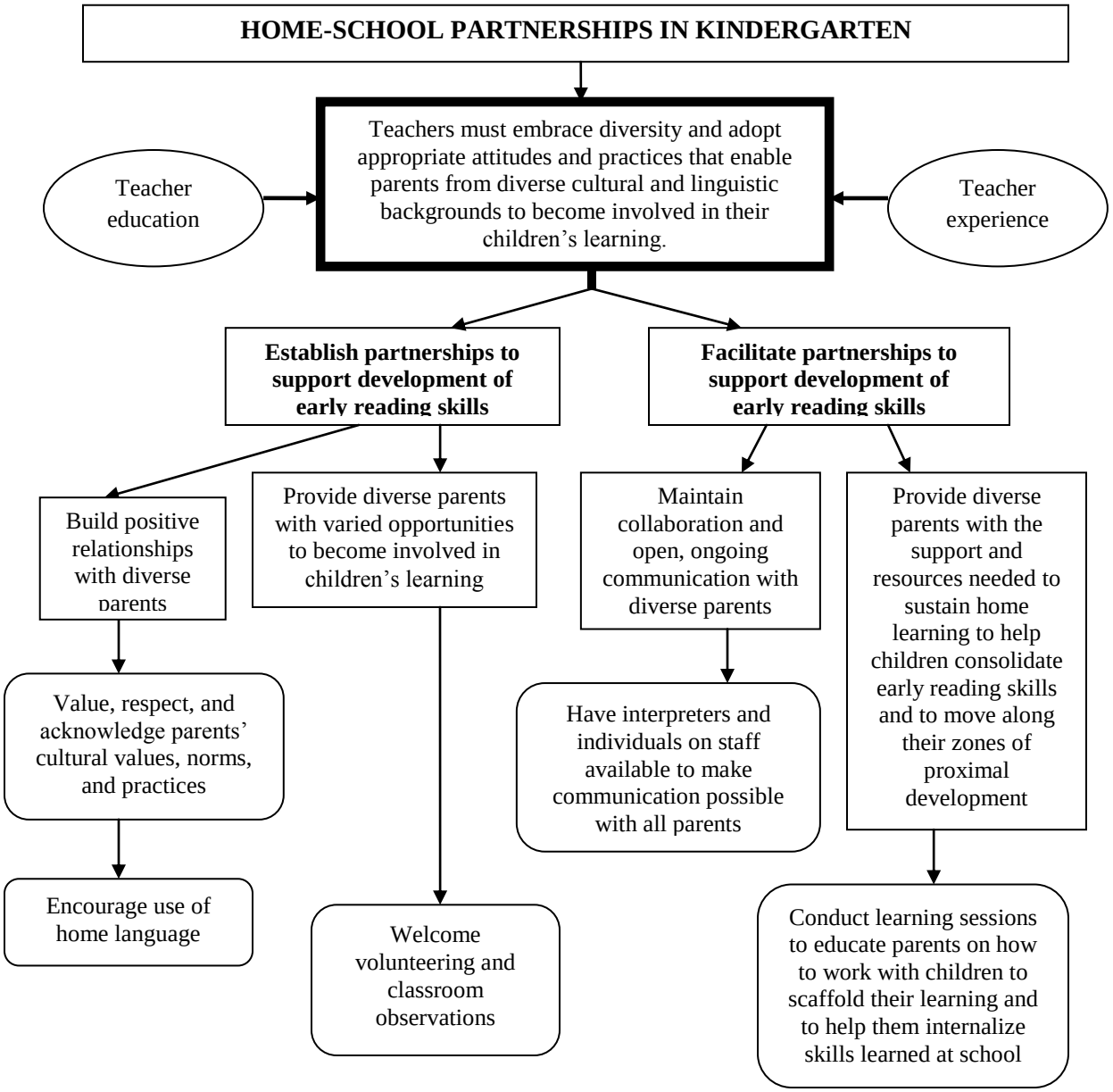

Figure 6. Grounded theory model.

Implications for Social Change

Kindergarten teachers have the opportunity to support families as children begin their formal schooling experience. The teachers can help to build a solid foundation that

will provide long-term benefits for children, their families, and the school. For many parents, especially those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the Kindergarten teacher is the first person at the school level to have ongoing, personal contact with them and; as a result, the quality of this relationship helps to set the stage for all subsequent connections of these parents with the school (Powell & Gerde, 2006). Kindergarten teachers have much power to motivate parents to become involved and to remain involved in their children's learning.

Working in partnership with culturally and linguistically diverse parents to empower them to become involved in their children's learning is imperative if we want our students to be well-educated, motivated, and contributing members of society. Although there is abundant literature on the benefits of home-school partnerships on children's academic achievement, there is very little information on working in partnership with diverse parents to support children's development of early reading skills, including basic vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness. Many studies have highlighted the need for children to develop these early reading skills in order to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1 (e.g., Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Therefore, this study may contribute to positive social change by giving Kindergarten teachers a voice to share their best practices related to establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships with diverse parents to support children's development of these early reading skills. Giving successful teachers an opportunity to share their best practices was very important because Kindergarten marks the beginning of children's formal schooling, so empowering parents to become involved in their

children's education at this early age has the potential to enhance children's learning and development while motivating parents to remain involved. Epstein (1991) emphasized that parents who become involved in their children's education during the early childhood years are likely to maintain this involvement in their later schooling.

Recommendations for Action

The findings of this study may be valuable to teachers, administrators, and school board officials. They also may add to the existing body of literature on this topic of home-school partnerships. Although there is much information on the benefits of home-school partnerships, there is very limited information on how these partnerships can be established in Kindergarten with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to support their children's development of early reading skills. Based on the findings of this study, the following are some of the major recommendations for action:

1. The teachers expressed the need for training on how to work with diverse families and they explained that experience working with diverse families would enable them to establish and facilitate these partnerships with much more ease. Therefore, teacher education programs should focus on providing students with training on how to serve families from diverse backgrounds. In addition, for their teaching placements, these individuals should be placed in schools with large populations of diverse students so that they can gain experience working with diverse students and their families.

2. Many parents from diverse backgrounds, especially those who are very new to the country, know very little about the education system in Canada. Therefore, at the beginning of the school year, teachers and administrators should work together to plan an orientation session for parents to learn about the system of education here. Any handouts should be translated into languages commonly spoken by the families, and interpreters should be available to translate information for parents and make it easier for them to ask questions or share concerns.
3. A large number of the parents are ELLs themselves and are hesitant to read books to their children in English. The teachers recommended that administrators provide the Kindergarten team at their school with funding to purchase dual-language books that the teachers can send home for parents to read to their children.
4. Many benefits can be accrued by inviting parents to participate in training sessions that focus on strategies they can use with their children at home. However, the teachers explained that finding the time to organize these sessions is challenging. Therefore, administrators should provide teachers with release time to plan for and organize these sessions. The teachers should be consulted on how to provide this release time so that it does not interfere with their instructional programs.
5. Communicating with parents is a challenge because many do not speak or understand English. The teachers explained that even though interpreters

are available and can be requested through the school board, the process is tedious, and the interpreters cost the school a lot of money. Therefore, given the reality of the diversity in schools, the school board should simplify this process and subsidize the cost of these interpreters. Moreover, the teachers commented that they often use the settlement worker or other staff members at their schools to communicate with parents. Therefore, every school should have funding for a settlement worker as well as staff members who are representative of the diverse groups in the school community.

6. Giving parents the opportunity to volunteer in their children's classroom is a great way to get them involved in their children's learning. However, the teachers shared that the application costs associated with getting the clearance to volunteer is turning many parents away. Therefore, administrators should waive this cost and simplify the process required to volunteer.

7. Although it is beneficial to engage parents in learning sessions where teachers provide parents with demonstrations related to strategies they can use to support their children's learning at home, they explained that it would be much easier to support parents if they had opportunities to observe how parents are able to use the strategies that they learn from the teachers. Therefore, it may be useful for teachers to organize afterschool or lunch-hour sessions; invite parents to come to the classroom; provide

them with demonstrations on particular skills (e.g., how to focus on letter-sound relationships when reading poetry); and give parents a chance to try these strategies during this learning session. In this way, the teachers can observe if the parents need further instruction on these strategies. Schecter, Ippolito, and Rashkovsky (2007) piloted a similar project at three urban schools in Ontario, Canada. The goal was to "raise the achievement of immigrant language minority students, to familiarize parents with the education system, and to encourage a climate of diversity as a valuable resource" (p. 69). The results of these pilot projects indicated that parents became "more aware of, and made more inquires about, specific learning tasks, and they initiated more communication with the school" (Schecter et al., p. 69).

8. Many of the teachers in this study were first-generation Canadians and they understood the challenges faced by immigrant parents. Therefore, it may be useful for Kindergarten teachers to be familiar with the immigrant experience so that they are able to relate to the parents they serve.

To disseminate the results of this study, the researcher will share these findings with the teachers who participated in this study, the administrators at the schools where these teachers work, and the research chair at the TDSB. In addition, the researcher intends to write and submit a manuscript to various journals and present her findings at the annual American Educational Research Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children conferences. The researcher also will strive to present

these findings at school board meetings and at seminars related to home-school partnerships at schools across the TDSB.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study focused exclusively on home-school partnerships with diverse parents to support their children's development of early reading skills. Although this study only included 12 teachers from the TDSB, it may be interesting to replicate this study with a larger sample that includes teachers from a number of different school boards and then compare the findings. Moreover, a longitudinal study could be conducted on the effects of an organized parent partnership program involving parents who are ELLs. The program could be developed using the points made by teachers in the study. In addition, in the process of analyzing, reporting, and interpreting the findings, the researcher believes that the following questions need closer examination:

1. What are parents' perceptions about and experiences with home-school partnerships, and what support do they need to become involved in their children's learning?
2. What is the relationship between parents' participation in a Kindergarten summer readiness program and their willingness to work in partnership with their children's Kindergarten teachers?
3. What are Kindergarten teachers' perceptions and experiences related to establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships to support other areas of the curriculum, such as math skills?

Researcher Reflection

As a Kindergarten teacher working in a school with a large population of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, I am passionate about home-school partnerships because I have observed how these partnerships both support and accelerate children's learning. I have observed the extent to which parents feel empowered when they work with teachers and how confident they feel when they understand the critical role that play in their children's learning. I have observed that regardless of the parents' cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds, they all want the very best for their children and will do what they can to help their children succeed. Many parents have come to Canada in search of a better education and a better life for their children.

Furthermore, in my capacity as a Kindergarten teacher, I have observed the frustrations that well-intentioned teachers feel when they are unable to connect with parents and build strong, working partnerships with them. Although many teachers understand that collaboration and communication are important requisites for home-school partnerships, they do not understand how these fit in when working with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, I was inspired to do this study, and I have realized the immense power that Kindergarten teachers have to create these partnerships and to set the tone with parents so that they are motivated to remain involved in their children's learning as they move on to grades beyond Kindergarten.

Based on my experience as a Kindergarten teacher, I had developed personal opinions and biases about home-school partnerships. It was important for me to acknowledge these biases. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005),

> Rather than pretend to have no biases, it makes more sense to examine your preconceptions and work out how your feelings might slant the research and then with this understanding in mind, work to formulate questions to offset your biases. (p. 82)

Therefore, during the process of interviewing the teachers, I was cognizant of these biases, so I carefully planned the probing questions I asked the participants to ensure that I did not lead their responses in any way. In addition, I kept a research journal that I used to document my thoughts as they emerged during the data collection and analysis phases. Writing in this journal helped me to focus my thoughts and reflect on my biases, thereby enabling me to control the influence of these biases on the collection, analysis, and reporting of my findings. An excerpt of one entry I made in this journal follows:

> Date: April 18, 2008
> Participant: KGTeacher3
> Location: Classroom in participant's school
> Time: 4:00 p.m.-5:10 p.m.
>
> The teacher spoke openly about her experiences of working with diverse families, and I completely agree with many of the things she said. In listening to her speak, it was so hard to control the urges I had to say, "I agree," or "you're right." Also, in addition to her responses to my questions, her body language also indicated how much she believes in home-school partnerships and how hard she works to make sure every parent has an opportunity to connect with her to get the support they may need. She almost had tears in her eyes when she was talking about one family she worked with! I wish all teachers were this motivated, and I am just so inspired by her. I have learned so much from her, and I now realize how much more I should be doing to reach out to parents.

To encourage the participants to share their thoughts and perceptions openly and candidly with me, I reminded them of the purpose of my study, explaining that I was interested in understanding how they are able to reach out to diverse parents to establish and facilitate partnerships with them. In addition, I found that the teachers were quite

relieved to know that their responses would remain confidential and that there would be no way for them to be identified based on their responses. Although this information was on the consent form, I found that emphasizing this before beginning the interview really helped to relieve their anxiety.

Finally, in doing this grounded theory study, I had the opportunity to meet some phenomenal teachers who inspired me and reminded me of the critical nature of the work that we do as Kindergarten teachers, especially with diverse families. Although I learned so very much from these teachers, the greatest lesson I learned was the need to have a strong work ethic. Even though we may sometimes lose our passion for what we do, we remain committed to educating our students. As this teacher explained so eloquently,

> I don't think you have to have the passion to be a successful Kindergarten teacher and to work well with parents, diverse or not, to support children's learning. I'll be honest in that my passion comes and goes. We are all humans, and things happen in our lives that influence how we feel about many things in our lives, including our work, but I do feel that this age group is really, really important, and I always think that my passion for the job comes and goes, but I think as long as you have a work ethic and a general respect and value for what you do, I don't think you always, always have to have passion. And sometimes I feel when it comes back after I have lost it for a bit, it's almost reenergizing, and so I think it would be really hard to be passionate all the time because we do have other lives and other things that influence how we feel, and we are not super people.

Summary

Toronto is known for its diversity. There are people in this city from almost every corner of the world, and as the teachers in this study noted, many have come to Canada in search of a better education and a better future for their children. Although there is much that educators can do to help students succeed, researchers have made it clear that educators alone cannot assure students' success without parental involvement. An

effective way to initiate this parental involvement is by creating and sustaining home-school partnerships (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). These partnerships are the foundation on which educators can build parents' confidence in the public education system, and they empower parents to work successfully with their children at home. Henderson and Berla (1994) asserted that supportive home-school partnerships not only enable students to succeed in school but they also engender success throughout their lives.

Although home-school partnerships are beneficial for all parents, the findings of this study indicated that these partnerships are particularly beneficial for parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, especially parents who may be new to Canada, who may be new to the English language, and who may be very unfamiliar with the Canadian system of education. The teachers explained that although parents from diverse backgrounds are very interested in supporting their children's learning, they sometimes struggle in trying to engage their children in learning activities at home that will motivate them, sustain their interest, and help them consolidate the early reading skills that they are learning at school. Therefore, the teachers emphasized that it is important for Kindergarten teachers serving diverse populations to reach out to these parents and provide them with the support and resources that they need to help their children develop the early reading skills that will enable them to benefit from formal reading instruction in Grade 1.

Kindergarten is the entry point for students into the public school system, and as the teachers in this study identified, the experiences that parents have in working with

Kindergarten teachers can set the tone for all future interactions with teachers as their children move from one grade to the next. Therefore, it is critical for Kindergarten teachers to build positive relationships with diverse parents to help them realize that the teachers want to work with them in a collaborative partnership to ensure that their children are able to learn to their greatest potential. The findings clearly indicated that before Kindergarten teachers can begin the process of establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they must be committed to embracing diversity and adopting appropriate practices that enable all parents to become involved in their children's learning. Teachers need to acknowledge, deconstruct, and reflect on their biases before they can embrace diversity and work with parents successfully. This teacher explained it precisely:

> These parents are entrusting us with their greatest, most important assets – their children. The more time I spend working at this school and with these parents, the more I realize just how much they have sacrificed to come to Canada and just how hard they work to make sure their kids have what they need to succeed. They struggle. They really, really struggle. And it doesn't matter whether they speak English, Somali, or Cantonese, and whether they wear jeans or a sari. The point is that they want their kids to succeed and it is up to us to understand where they are coming from, to accept their culture, to be open to their way of thinking, and to realize that they want the best for their children. At the end of the day, we have to understand that to work with these parents, we have to learn to accept what may be new to us, and we have to be open to understanding that these parents may have a different approach to raising their children, but they still want the best for them. It may be hard and it may be new, but that's the only way we can gain their trust and work with them to help their kids learn. Over the years, I've learned that whether they speak English or not, there is so much that they can do for their children but we have to accept them, respect them, and really embrace what they bring with them if we want them to work with us. It's all about respecting and accepting them for who they are.

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APPENDIX A: LETTER OF APPROVAL FROM ERRC

Toronto District School Board

Organizational Development
1 Civic Centre Court, Ground Floor, Toronto ON M9C 2B3 • Tel: (416) 394-4929 • Fax: (416) 394-4946

September 7, 2007

Dear Keenjal Shah:

RE: *Bridging the Gap: Home-School Partnerships in Kindergarten*

As Chair of the External Research Review Committee (ERRC) of the Toronto District School Board, I have expedited the review and approval of your request to conduct the above-mentioned study. Your application was very thorough and has met all the ERRC criteria.

Given that the number of teachers you intend to interview is quite small, this approval covers both the pilot phase (2 kindergarten teachers) and the larger dissertation study (up to 12 participants). Please note however that if there are any changes to the methodology or the research questions as a result of your pilot study, these should be forwarded to me prior to beginning the second phase.

You may begin the process of inviting teachers to participate through their school principals. We wish you luck with this project and look forward to receiving your research reports upon completion. I think your findings about best practices will be of interest to your kindergarten colleagues and the study participants.

Sincerely,

Sincerely,

Sally Erling, Chair
External Research Review Committee, TDSB
E-mail: ERRC@tdsb.on.ca

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Dear Teacher,
You are invited to take part in a research study focusing on Kindergarten teachers' experiences and perceptions on establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships to support children's development of early reading skills. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are:

1. Teaching Kindergarten.
2. You have been teaching for a minimum of five years.
3. At least 30% of the students you teach are from diverse cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds.

Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be part of the study.

For your information, this study is being conducted by a researcher named Keenjal Shah, who is a doctoral student at Walden University and a Kindergarten teacher working with the Toronto District School Board. In addition, the ethics department at Walden University and the research department at the Toronto District School Board have approved this study. Also, the principal at your school has provided consent for your participation in this study.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to explore Kindergarten teachers' experiences and perceptions related to establishing home-school partnerships to facilitate parental involvement of children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The goal of this study is to understand teachers' experiences and to determine "best practices" about how to successfully establish these partnerships so that parents are able to work with their children at home in order to support the development of their early reading skills.

Procedures:
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Answer questions during an interview that will last for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interview will be tape recorded using a digital voice recorder. The interview will then be transcribed by the researcher and this transcript will be shared with you to ensure its accuracy.
- Share newsletters/information letters you use to communicate with parents (e.g., monthly newsletters).

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is completely **voluntary**. This means that there is **no** obligation for you to participate in this study. If you decide to join the study now, you can withdraw from the study at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
There are no risks to participating in this study. The benefits of participating in this study include the opportunity for you to share best practices that can help other Kindergarten teachers improve their ability to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with the ultimate goal of helping children develop and strengthen their early reading skills.

Compensation:
As a token of appreciation, you will receive a book at the end of this study to add to your classroom library.

Confidentiality:
Any information you provide will be kept completely confidential. The researcher will **not** use your information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or any other information that could identify you or your school in any reports of the study. However, please note that if any information comes to light that indicates the fact that the children and/or their parents are being mistreated or abused in any way, the researcher will be obligated to disclose this information to your school's principal.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher's name is Keenjal Shah. The researcher's faculty advisor is Dr. Amie Beckett. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher via e-mail (keenjal@hotmail.com) or phone (416-315-9756) or the advisor at amie.beckett@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Director of the Research Center at Walden University. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 1210.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

With appreciation,
Keenjal Shah

Statement of Consent:
☐ I have read the above information, I have received answers to any questions that I have at this time, and I consent to participate in this study.

☐ I understand what is required of me in this study, that my participation is completely voluntary, that I can withdraw from the study at any time, and that all the information I provide will remain strictly confidential.

☐ I consent to being audio-taped.

Printed Name of Participant _____

Participant's Written or Electronic* Signature _____

Researcher's Written or Electronic* Signature _____

Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.

APPENDIX C: DATA COLLECTION TOOL – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview questions:
Questions about teachers' general perceptions and experiences related to home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds:

How do you feel when you meet new parents?

What are your feelings about communicating with diverse parents? What challenges do you face?

How do you communicate with parents who speak little or no English?

How do you establish rapport with these diverse parents?

What do you enjoy most about working with diverse parents?

What characteristics do you consider as "strengths" when working with diverse parents? How about "weaknesses"?

What are your own strengths in the area of communication with diverse parents? Weaknesses?

How do you feel when you work with these diverse parents? What strategies do you use to manage any negative feelings?

Do you have the support to explore and express these feelings?

In your experience, what have you learned about diverse parents' support for literacy at home? Is there a difference between the parents of Junior Kindergarten children and Senior Kindergarten children?

Have you ever experienced difficulty communicating about literacy with a parent from a diverse cultural or linguistic background? What was the nature of that difficulty? Were you able to resolve the problem? If so, how?

Did you or a teacher you know ever have a breakthrough with a difficult parent? Tell me about it.

Questions about home-school partnerships:
What do you do to show diverse parents that their ideas, comments, and concerns are always welcome?

How does your classroom support and/or encourage parent involvement?

What does “home-school partnership” mean to you? As a Kindergarten teacher, what role do you feel you play in establishing these partnerships with parents from diverse backgrounds?

In your opinion, what kinds of early literacy activities are appropriate for parents to initiate with their children? How do these differ from school-based activities?

Can you describe an activity, program, or home-school strategy that you use (or have used in the past) to support parents as they work with their children on reading skills at home?

How do you feel you can improve your home-school program(s) to support children’s development of vocabulary, alphabetic principle, and phonological awareness? Is there anything specific about your program that you feel would help other teachers establish and facilitate their home-school programs?

In your opinion, what resources and/or support do you need to enhance home-school partnerships with diverse parents to support children’s reading success?

What do you hope to learn that you feel will help you more effectively establish home-school partnerships with diverse parents?

Is there anything else that we haven’t discussed that you would like to add?

APPENDIX D: E-MAIL SENT TO SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

February 2008

Re: Dissertation Study

Dear _____,
My name is Keenjal Shah and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am also a Kindergarten teacher at ABC JMS and I have been with the Toronto District School Board for five years.

As part of my doctoral program, I need to complete an independent research study that will be the basis for my final dissertation paper. For your information, I am going to be doing a qualitative study to explore Kindergarten teachers' perceptions about home-school partnerships and how these partnerships can support the development of children's early reading skills. The overall purpose of this study is to develop a framework or model based on "best practices" related to establishing and facilitating home-school partnerships that enable parents to work with their children at home so that these children are able to develop critical early reading skills.

With your consent, I am hoping to invite _____, the Kindergarten teacher at your school, to participate in this study. In order to collect the data for this study, the teacher will be interviewed for 45 to 60 minutes and the teacher will be asked to share newsletters/information letters that are sent home with the children. Please note that participation in this study is completely voluntary and that all information provided by the teacher will remain strictly confidential and the teacher's name and/or the school's name will **not** appear in any report or document. In addition, the interview will not take place during the instructional day and will take place at a time and place that is most convenient for the teacher.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me via e-mail at keenjal.shah@tel.tdsb.on.ca or via phone at 416-315-9756. My supervisor's name is Dr. Amie Beckett and she can be contacted at amie.beckett@waldenu.edu. Also, please note that this study has been approved by the ethics department at Walden University and the research department at the Toronto District School Board. I am attaching the approval letter from the Ethics Review Board at the Toronto District School Board.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Keenjal Shah

APPENDIX E: E-MAIL POSTED ON KINDERGARTEN FORUM

Hello all,
My name is Keenjal Shah and I am in my fifth year of teaching Kindergarten with the TDSB. Presently, I am working on my doctorate and my research focuses on home-school partnerships in Kindergarten. More specifically, I am investigating how Kindergarten teachers are able to establish and facilitate these partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse parents to support children's development of early reading skills. The purpose of my study is to develop a model for all Kindergarten teachers to use to create and sustain such partnerships with diverse parents so that they have the support they may need to promote their children's learning at home. Research has consistently shown the many benefits of the work parents do with their children at home in supporting the development of children's early reading skills (e.g., oral language, alphabet skills, vocabulary, phonological awareness, etc.).

This is a qualitative study and I will be collecting my data through one-on-one interviews with 12 Kindergarten teachers. I am looking for teachers who teach a diverse group of students and who have established (or are working towards establishing) strong home-school partnerships with parents, wherein they work closely with parents (e.g., by initiating home reading programs, by organizing workshops, inviting parents to volunteer in their classrooms, etc.) to support children's development of early reading skills.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will need to meet with you in person to conduct the interview. I anticipate that the interviews will last anywhere between 30 to 60 minutes, depending on how much you have to share. While I will need to conduct the initial interview in person, any follow-up questions can be addressed on the phone or via email. While I cannot conduct these interviews during school hours, I am happy to work around your schedule and will meet at a time and place that is most convenient for you. Also, more than an interview, our time together will be more of a guided dialogue or conversation wherein you will have an opportunity to share your thoughts with me. I will also send you the questions before we meet so you may have some time to reflect on them before the interview.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email me back (TEL: Keenjal Shah or keenjal@hotmail.com). Please note that I will contact the principal at your school with information about this study to ensure that he/she is aware of and approves your participation.

Finally, please note that this study has been **approved** by the research ethics committee (i.e., Institutional Review Board) at Walden University as well as by the research chair at the TDSB. All information you provide will remain strictly confidential and your name or the name of your school will **not** appear in any report that will result from this study. The sole purpose of this study is to understand how Kindergarten teachers across our very diverse board are able to break down barriers and connect with parents to support children's learning.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,
Keenjal

APPENDIX F: LIST OF CODES FOR DATA ANALYSIS

Code and Code Abbreviation	**Definition of Code**	**Examples of Code from Interview Transcripts**
Teachers' Perceptions about Communication with Diverse Parents (TPC)	Teachers' thoughts, feelings, and general perceptions about communicating with diverse parents.	"I think communication with parents is absolutely critical…"
Teacher Communication Strategies with Diverse Parents (TCS)	Strategies used by teachers to communicate with diverse parents.	"I use lots of hand gestures. Sometimes if I am speaking to a parent outside of my classroom, I will ask another parent to please translate for me."
Parent Communication Strategies (PCS)	Strategies used by diverse parents with limited English to communicate with teachers.	"Parents often bring someone they know to translate for them such as an older child."
Communication Challenges (CC)	Challenges considered by teachers to impede communication between teachers and diverse parents.	"And as far as the challenges go, in our community, the challenges are definitely related to issues around language."
Teachers' Definitions of Home-School Partnerships with Diverse Parents (TDHSP)	Teachers' thoughts, feelings, experiences, and general perceptions about home-school partnerships with diverse parents.	"To me, a home-school partnership involves parents and teachers working together to support every child's learning…"
Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of Parent Involvement (TPEPI)	Teachers' perceptions and experiences related to work diverse parents do at home with children that focus on early reading skills.	"The parents want their children to read. They want them to do well…"
Teachers' Role in Partnerships with Diverse Parents (TR)	Specific roles of teachers in home-school partnerships with diverse parents.	"And so for us as Kindergarten teachers, it's really not just about teaching the children but it's about being there for the parents…"
Parents' Role in Partnership (PR)	Specific roles of parents in home-school partnerships.	"But the main thing I think parents should work on with their children at home is reading aloud to them…"
Strategies to Build Relationships with Diverse Parents (SBR)	Strategies used by teachers to establish rapport with diverse parents and to build a relationship with them.	"I am welcoming. I have an open door policy so parents always know that they are welcome in my class…"
Strategies to Involve Parents from Diverse Backgrounds (SIP)	Strategies used by teachers to involve diverse parents in their children's learning.	"We are reaching out to parents and inviting them to share their stories with the children…"
Perceptions about use of Home Language (TPHL)	Teachers' perceptions about parents' use of home language for reading and other literacy activities at home.	"I really strongly, strongly believe that they have to continue with their first language."

Teacher Support (TS)	Support needed by teachers to facilitate partnerships with diverse parents.	"We need a strong team of teachers…they are our greatest support…"
Resources (RE)	Resources needed by teachers to support and enhance home-school partnerships to support children's development of early reading skills.	"We need more books and there needs to be more resources put into English language learning classes for parents."
Teachers' Perceived Barriers (TPB)	Barriers perceived by teachers that affect home-school partnerships with diverse parents.	"Parents also have their own expectations depending on how they were schooled and the education system they are used to…"
Teacher Knowledge Development (TKD)	Knowledge that teachers need to develop in order to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with diverse parents.	"I would love to learn more languages…I'd love to learn more about what the parents' needs are…"
Teachers' Feelings about Diversity (TFD)	Teachers' feelings related to working with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.	"There are times when culturally what I expect is not what the parents expect. And I have to understand that."
Strategies used to Support Early Reading Skills (SSERD)	Activities, programs, and other strategies used by teachers to support the work diverse parents do with their children at home that focus on early reading skills.	"And to support the parents at home, I send home snuggle up books, library books, and I send home practice sheets from the jolly phonics program…"
Teachers' general Feelings about Parents from Diverse Backgrounds (TFP)	Teachers' general feelings, perceptions, and experiences about working with diverse parents.	"Meeting parents is so important. You learn how they view their child, their perspective…"
Teachers' Communication related to Reading (TCR)	Teachers' general feelings, perceptions, and experiences related to communicating to diverse parents about reading.	"It is challenging to explain to parents that not all instruction is rote and even though a child can read all these words, they may not understand the story…"

APPENDIX G: AUDIT TRAIL

Bridging the Gap: Home-School Partnerships in Kindergarten

This audit trail outlines the steps I have taken to collect and analyze the data for this grounded theory study.

Collection of Data

Participants

A. Equity officers at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) were contacted to get the names of the schools with the largest number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
B. Principals at these schools were contacted and asked to recommend the names of Kindergarten teachers at their respective schools.
C. An e-mail was posted on the Kindergarten teacher forum on the TDSB's email system, inviting Kindergarten teachers to participate in this study. Specific details about the study in addition to the selection criteria for participants were outlined.
D. Teachers were contacted in person or via telephone before the day of the interview. At this time, the consent form was shared with the participant, any questions they had were answered, and a mutually convenient time and place was set for the interview.

Interviews

A. Each of the 12 Kindergarten teachers participated in an initial interview and follow-up interviews were conducted with five teachers. The following is a list of teachers that were interviewed and the date and location where they were interviewed:

Initial Interviews:

Teacher (Pseudonym)	Date of Interview	Location of Interview
Teacher 1– Pam	14/04/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 2 – John	15/04/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 3 – Kevin	17/04/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 4 – Helen	19/04/2008	At teacher's home
Teacher 5 – Rosy	21/04/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 6 – Angela	22/04/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 7 – Mark	24/04/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 8 – Asha	25/04/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 9 – Smita	28/04/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 10 – Awigar	30/04/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 11 – Tasneem	02/05/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 12 – Isha	03/05/2008	At teacher's home

Follow-up interviews:

Teacher (Pseudonym)	Date of Interview	Location of Interview
Teacher 3 – Kevin	25/05/2008	At teacher's home
Teacher 4 – Helen	25/05/2008	At teacher's home
Teacher 6 – Angela	26/05/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 8 – Asha	26/05/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 9 – Smita	27/05/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 11 – Tasneem	27/05/2008	At teacher's school
Teacher 12 – Isha	28/05/2008	At teacher's school

B. An identical list of questions was used with each participant and probing questions were asked as needed. Each interview was tape recorded using a digital voice recorder.
C. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and the transcript was sent to each participant for verification.

Document Analysis

A. Each of the 12 Kindergarten teachers was asked to share examples of homework activities and letters sent home to parents. The researcher kept a copy of these documents for analysis.

Data Analysis

Interview Transcripts

A. Data analysis was initiated as soon as the first interview was transcribed. I read over words, sentences, paragraphs, and whole sections of the first and subsequent transcripts in detail to identify codes to use to analyze the data.
B. This preliminary list of codes was written down and used to analyze all the interview transcripts. If new codes emerged, all transcripts were reanalyzed to check to see if there were data that supported these new codes.
C. As the coding process continued, I engaged in memo writing to note down my thoughts and ideas about emerging and recurring themes.
D. To prevent any preconceived ideas or my biases from influencing my analysis of the data or the way I presented my analysis, I kept a log to write down any feelings that I was having that pertained to the actual process of collected the data or to the data that were emerging from the interviews and document analysis.
E. Once all transcripts had been analyzed, I repeated this process to ensure that I did not miss any data.
F. Once the coding had been completed, I created electronic files for each code and copy and pasted words, sentences, paragraphs, or sections from each transcript that fit this code.
G. Codes were then merged to form categories and the themes for each research question were then identified.

H. Coding continued until no new insights were gleaned and until no new codes emerged.

Document Analysis

A. Samples of homework activities, newsletters, and other notices and letters sent home were collected from each of the teachers. The list of codes generated to analyze interview transcripts were used to analyze these documents.

Interpretation of Data

A. Based on the analysis of the interview transcripts and on the documents collected from the teachers, major themes for each of the research questions were identified. In the report presented in Chapter 4, these themes were supported using verbatim responses from the participants and examples from the documents.
B. Follow-up interviews were conducted with seven teachers because I needed to get more details from them for some of the responses they had provided.
C. Based on the deep-seated theme that emerged from the data collected from interviews and document analyses, I developed a theory to explain what is needed to establish and facilitate home-school partnerships with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Validation of Data

A. A copy of the interview transcript was sent to each participant for verification.
B. Shared interpretations of findings with five participants because some of their responses to the interview questions were not clear and I was not sure about what they were trying to say. I wanted to ensure that I was not interpreting their information incorrectly.
C. Repeated the coding process each time a new code emerged from the data to ensure that I was not missing any pertinent data.
D. Kept a research journal to document my thoughts about any biases I had and any positive or negative feelings that emerged during the data collection and analysis process. The purpose of this was to ensure that I am always aware of my personal feelings so that I can control the influence of these feelings on the interpretation of my data.

APPENDIX H: EXAMPLE OF A SECTION OF CODED TRANSCRIPT

The following is a section of the coded transcript from my interview with Teacher 12 (pseudonym: Isha):

How do you feel when you meet new parents?
I really enjoy the experience and I find that one of the things I do enjoy about KG is that you have that daily contact with parents. (TPC) It just makes it easier because if you ever have anything to tell them that you are worried about or that is negative in any way, you already have a relationship with them. And also, I can remember being a parent of a young child and you've always had control over who's with your child and now a stranger is taking over so it can be overwhelming. I find that meeting parents and giving them an opportunity to get to know me really helps them to be less nervous about the whole experience of sending their child to school. (TPC)

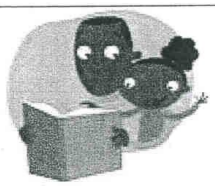
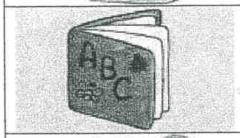
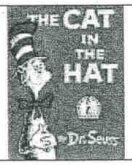
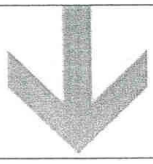
What are your feelings about communicating with parents? What challenges do you face?
I think that when language is a barrier, it is really important to have face-to-face communication (TCS) so that you can gauge how much the parents understand and give them the benefit of body language to help them with this understanding. (TCS) When I speak with them on the phone, I have no way of knowing whether they got the message so I really do prefer face-to-face communication. (TCS) And I also find you really need to speak slowly and to leave time for a response. (TCS) Often times, they will ask for clarification so you have to give them that time for clarification. And there is that fine line between being insulting and needing to simplify everything so that the parents understand. So language really is a big challenge. (CC) And along with that, there are cultural challenges (TPC) also. For example, parents come from very different systems of education and their expectations of their children are often unrealistic (TPB) so we have to deal with that. So we do all this educating with how we teach so it's just a different of experience.

How do you communicate with parents who speak little or no English?
The body language helps (CC) and whenever possible, I will get a translator. (CC) And we have people on staff who speak many of the languages spoken in the community as well as some parent volunteers (CC) so I really count on them to help me with the translating. And the great thing about having staff members help with these translations is that we can talk to the parents much more frequently. If we always have to request an official translator to be sent from the board office, we may only have a few opportunities to talk to the parents. (TPC) But with the staff members available to translate, it becomes possible to talk to the parents as often se we would like.

How do you establish rapport with these parents?
There are a number of things we do to make it easier for parents and also because we want parents working with us whether they speak English or not as partners in education. So we have every June a day that the new JK kids come with the parents to the school. (SBR) We used to have them come in and join our class for an hour and we'd have activities that the children could try and I would go around and talk to the parents. But we found that it was just too chaotic and there were too many people in the room. So what we do now is we send the children in our classes off to the gym for a performance and we would have just the new kids and their parents in the classrooms. This is much better because it gives me a real opportunity to talk to the parents but it also gives the parents an opportunity to talk to each other. And we put out simple activities for them to try and we do a little song and story with them. The purpose of this is to help the children feel comfortable and to help them realize that school is a fun and safe place to be. And parents can also see the environment and get a sense of the types of activities their children will be engaging in at school. (SBR) And the conversations at this time are very informal. If a parent is worried about their child, they will often talk to me. But it's very much just a "Hi" and "Welcome" and answering any questions they have.

APPENDIX I: SUGGESTIONS FOR BORROW-A-BOOK

Suggestions for Borrow –a – Book

	• Show your child reading is fun. • Turn off the TV. • Sit with your child and enjoy!
	• Look at the pictures. Have your child tell a story about the pictures.
	• Look for letters or words your child recognizes. Point to new ones.
	• Look for upper case letters.
	• Look for lower case letters.
	• Find words that rhyme. (e.g. cat – hat) Look for other words that rhyme.
	• Show your child that we read from left to right. • At the end of the line, show your child to go to the next line and move from left to right.
	• Show your child to start at the top of the page.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Keenjal Shah
Keenjal@hotmail.com

Education

Ph.D. in Early Childhood Education
Walden University, August 2008

MA in Early Childhood Education
Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto, May 2003

BS (Honors) in Human Biology
University of Toronto, May 2001

Teaching Experience

Sept. 2003-Present	Kindergarten Teacher and Primary Division Chair Toronto District School Board